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TEXAS AND RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

In This Issue:

CAVE OF SKULL FACE
by Steuart Emery

FEATURING: **WET-BACK WAR**

A HARD-HITTING JIM HATFIELD NOVEL BY **JACKSON COLE**

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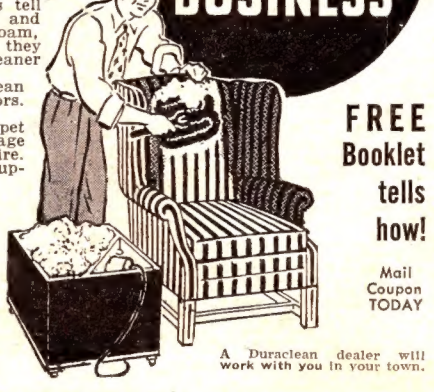

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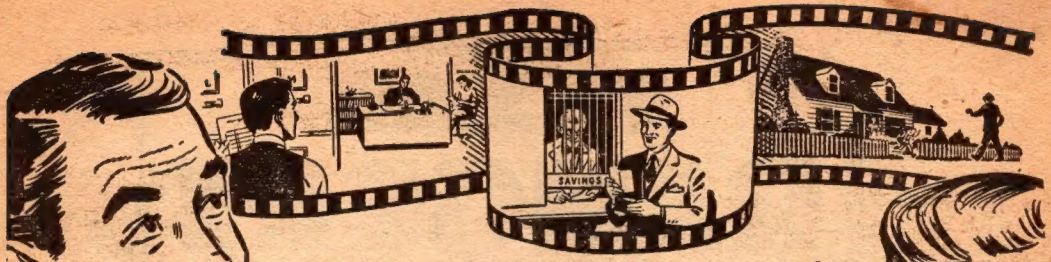

Picture yourself going places

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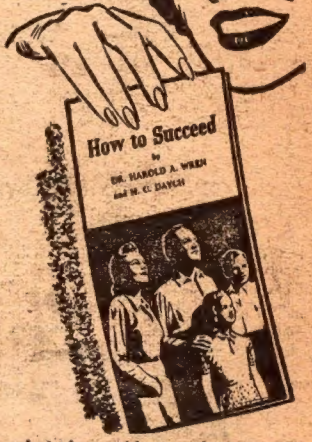

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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 58, No. 2 APRIL, 1955

A Complete Jim Hatfield Novel

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To this gang running wet-back cattle the only good Ranger was a dead Ranger, and the Lone Wolf knew it

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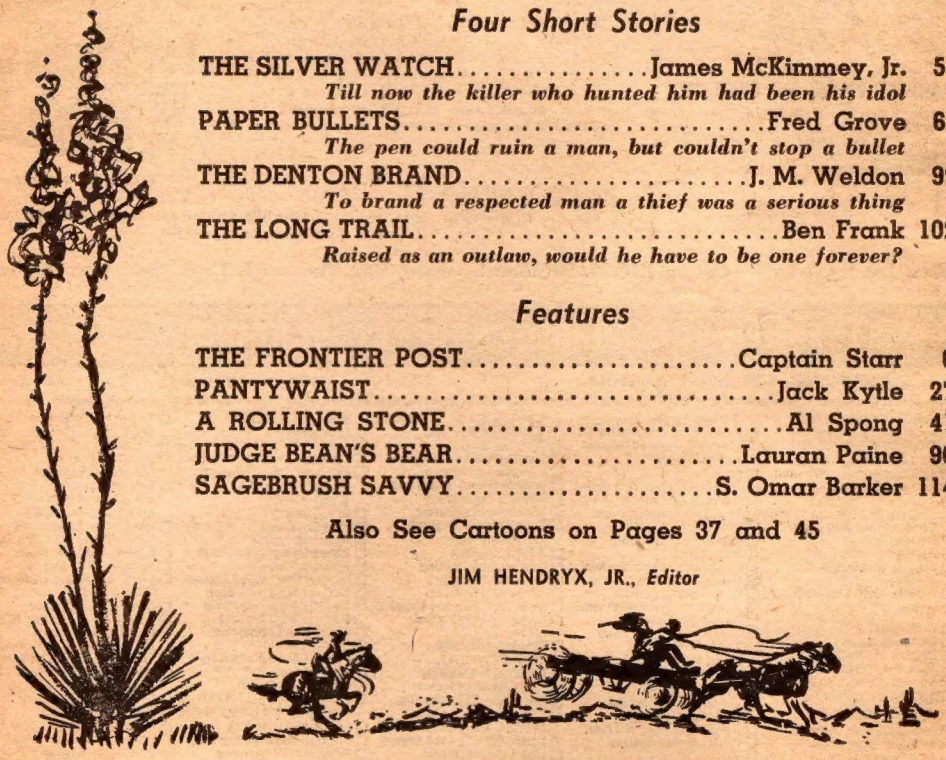
JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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Sacajawea, The Bird Woman

ORDINARILY the exploration of a new country is thought of as a man's work, although there must be women standing behind their men when the time comes for colonization. Men explore a country; women civilize it.

However, it was a woman who made possible the opening of the great Northwest to white settlement. And an Indian woman, at that.

When the Louisiana Purchase gave the United States a strip of land from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific, President Jefferson ordered the country explored and mapped by Captains Lewis and Clark. And the most important functionary of the Lewis and Clark Expedition was a Shoshone Indian woman by the name of Sacajawea, which meant "Bird Woman," in the Shoshone tongue. The name was given to her because she was so light and agile, flitting through the forests like a bird.

Lewis and Clark set out from St. Louis and followed up the Missouri River into the country of the Hidatsa Indians, where they needed a guide and interpreter. Here they found a French trapper who claimed that he knew the country and the Indians. They took him on, along with his wife, a Shoshone woman who had been captured in battle by the Hidatsas.

It turned out that the French trapper had been exaggerting his knowledge. He was a rum hound, and wasn't worth much to the expedition. But his wife was different. She could speak English and many Indian tongues. She knew the sign language, and she knew the whole country.

So it was that Sacajawea, the little Indian woman with a drunken trapper husband, led the Lewis and Clark mapping expedition from the headwaters of the Missouri to the Pacific Ocean and safely back again.

And here is the most extraordinary part of the story—she led that company of white soldiers through many hundreds of miles of hostile, treacherous mountain country carrying a papoose on her back!

She was a tireless scout, setting the day's march, locating food, watching for dangers from nature and from hostile Indians, fighting through storm and heat and cold as she kept the expedition on its trail, negotiating with whatever Indians ruled each territory they passed.

Her husband had gone along on the expedition, though useless baggage, until he finally disappeared. It was evident that the woman was soon going to have a child, but though the officers tried to get her to take things easy, she refused. Then one day they missed her for about three hours.

But she showed up. She had stopped beside a creek crossing the trail, it seems, and there alone had had her baby. She had bathed it and wrapped it, strapped it to her back and caught up with the explorers!

She took little Baptiste along with her, and when she had led the expedition back to St. Louis, they had covered 4,000 miles, and had opened up the great Northwest.

The Bird Woman went on down into Oklahoma and married a Comanche, and has descendants now living in Oklahoma. When her second husband died, she took her youngest child and a bundle of provisions and walked back to the Shoshones.

She made the trip alone, and found her son Baptiste, who grew up to be a great leader of the Shoshones. The government had educated him in gratitude to his mother. And before she died she was honored many times by the government and by historical societies. A river, a mountain, a lake and a National Park have been given her Shoshone name—Sacajawea. Yet few people realize the important part she played in settling the Northwest.

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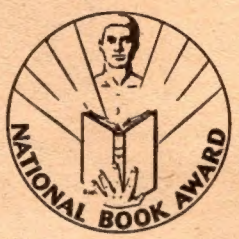

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Wet-Back War

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

"Remember the Alamo!"

POSING as a horse trader, the stranger had drifted into Texas from Colorado by way of the historic Loving-Goodnight trail. He drove a jag of variously branded saddle stock, picked up here and there by barter or cash sale, and stabled them over night at the Wells Fargo relay barn in Pecos.

Before dawn the following morning the trader, who had signed the stable book as "Wes Condon, El Paso," appeared at the barn to saddle up. The southbound Marfa stage was due shortly and a lone hostler was working by lantern-light, readying a fresh hitch of Morgans.

The horse trader sized up the hostler with more than

3/21/86 SOJS
Lester Belcher
Saltville, VA
Woody Hagadish
Read: / /

To the gang running wet-back cattle across the Border

the only good Ranger was a dead one, and the Lone Wolf

knew that a single misstep would be his last move on earth

ordinary interest. This handsome, rugged man of thirty-odd he knew, was not the stocktender he appeared to be. For he also knew flat-crowned stetson, blue work shirt, spurred Coffeyville boots and bibless levis disguised the most famous Ranger in Texas.

"Wes Condon" waited until the hostler had finished his harnessing chores. Then he strolled over to the row of stalls, fingering the brass claim check which indicated that he had settled his stable bill.

"I'll saddle your bronc in a moment, sir," the hostler said.

Condon grinned. "Won't be necessary, Hatfield," he answered enigmatically. "Your barn-swamping chore is finished. Get your possibles together. You're boarding that stage for Marfa."

The hostler's gray-green eyes remained blank, inscrutable. Before he could speak, Condon reached in a shirt pocket and drew out an object which glinted like silver in the dim light of the barn lantern. A deputy U. S. Marshal's shield.

"I'm Barry DeLane, Hatfield," the horse trader said. "Got a message for you from Ranger headquarters, from McDowell himself. He's sending you down to the Rio Grande on another case."

Jim Hatfield—whose temporary job as a Wells Fargo hostler here in Pecos was a cover for the fact that he was the celebrated Lone Wolf, working incognito on an important assignment—reached out to shake DeLane's hand. This was the first time he had had the pleasure of meeting the roving deputy marshal who for years had cooperated with the Texas Rangers.

"I'm supposed to be watching incoming stages for Comanche Joe Brandywine, Marshal," Hattfield said. "We've been tipped off that he's heading this way by stage, aiming to pull off a bank robbery at Fort Stockton."

The deputy marshal shook his head. "I know that. Captain McDowell has put another Ranger on the job at the Mentone express station—Chollie Murdock. He knows Brandywine. If that owlhooter rides through by stage, Murdock will pick him up."

HATFIELD cuffed back his stetson and ran splayed fingers through his shock of jet-black hair. It was well known to him how often Ranger headquarters used Barry DeLane as a messenger, in the guise of a roaming horse trader. DeLane's mobility came in handy.

"I'm plenty glad to get reassigned, Marshal," the Lone Wolf said. "McDowell's had me on this job for over two weeks now. I'm beginning to wonder if that bank robber tip was on the up and up or not."

DeLane shrugged. "I'm to pick up your stallion and take him overland to Black Mesa, Jim. I'll leave him at the Big Bend Livery there. You'll pick up your horse at your convenience, later. In other words, when you've finished this special assignment McDowell telegraphed me about."

Curiosity piqued Hatfield. The outlaw he was supposed to put under arrest when he arrived in Pecos, Comanche Joe Brandywine, was high on the wanted criminal list at Ranger headquarters in Austin. For Captain McDowell to put another Ranger on the Brandywine case and reassign his top lawman to duty near Black Mesa—far to the south, near the Rio Grande border—was proof in itself that Hatfield's chief had an important deal lined up for him.

"'*Sta bueno,* Marshal," Hatfield said. "Goldy's in the fourth stall from the far end, yonder . . . Let's see that telegram the boss sent you. Where'd you pick it up?"

"Mentone, day before yesterday," the federal lawman said. "The message was in code. I had orders to burn it up at once, and relay the instructions personally. McDowell didn't want to run the risk of sending an official telegram to a stable swamper here in town. He knew I was heading south with my jag of trading stock. I'm always in touch with your headquarters."

Hatfield nodded when the marshal paused, waiting for him to go on.

"Here's the deal," DeLane said. "A rancher down on Black Mesa has ap-

pealed to you boys to help fight a gang of wet-back renegades who are smuggling stolen cattle across the river into Mexico. You're to go to work for this rancher as an ordinary cowhand and get a line on these rustlers, working incognito. If a word leaked out that you were a Texas Ranger your life wouldn't be worth a plugged peso."

Hatfield made no comment. This was how he usually worked—undercover, his Ranger badge concealed in a secret compartment stitched in the lining of one of his cowboots. He had earned his "Lone Wolf" nickname because he so often worked solo on assignments that would seem to call for a full Ranger troop.

"What's this rancher's name down at Black Mesa?" he asked. "The one I'm to report to."

DeLane grinned. "McDowell's telegram didn't say. Old Roarin' Bill is playing this really close to the vest. Wouldn't even trust me with that information."

Hatfield's brows arched. "He's carrying the hush-hush too far, then. How am I to know? I take the stage to Black Mesa. Okay. Then what do I do? Make a tour of the ranches down there to find out which one wants me to bust up this wet-back gang?"

DeLane said, "The cattleman you'll be working for will approach you when you reach Black Mesa, Hatfield. The password is 'Remember the Alamo.' Whoever says that to you is the range boss you'll work with. Don't ask *me* why Roarin' Bill goes to such fantastic lengths to keep your identity a secret down there. Must be he's trying to keep his favorite Ranger from cashing in his chips premature."

Hatfield pulled in a deep breath. Until he reached Black Mesa and was approached by some total stranger with a cryptic password, his curiosity would have to wait.

"All right, Marshal." He grinned. "Will I see you in Black Mesa, maybe?"

DeLane was already throwing a saddle over the back of a leggy black gelding in the first stall, preparatory to hitting the trail with his herd of livestock.

"Doubt it. If we do meet, I won't know you from Adam. I'm on my way to Presidio. Won't linger in Black Mesa any longer than it takes me to leave your Goldy horse at the Big Basin barn."

THE two lawmen shook hands in farewell and Hatfield led the stage team out of the barn. In ten minutes the Marfa stage would pull in, so he hastily rolled

JIM HATFIELD

his bedding and packed his warsack in the hostlers' bunkhouse lean-to off the adobe station.

Checking out with the Wells Fargo agent was a simple routine. That official was the only person aside from the marshal in this cowtown who knew Jim Hatfield's true identity. Just another swamper calling for his time.

When the southbound stage pulled out, Jim Hatfield was aboard the Concord as a passenger, booked through to Black Mesa, his belongings stowed in the rear boot.

Gray daylight was creeping across the West Texas country when the rumbling stage overhauled and passed "Wes Condon" and his jag of saddle horses, southbound on the same road. Traveling with the trader's herd was the Lone Wolf's golden sorrel stallion, but his saddle was in a burlap gunnysack aboard this stage. To all outward appearances, Jim Hatfield was a tumbleweed cowhand headed for another range in search of a spread where he could rent his lass'rope. . . .

It took Hatfield's stage three days and two nights to cover the two hundred and fifty miles of sun-baked frontier country to reach the mounain-girt valley known as Black Mesa. Hemmed in by rugged, tawny ranges, this valley was a spearhead pointed at the Rio Grande River, off behind the heat-haze to southward.

Sleek cattle grazed on the sage flats here where the stage road skirted a meandering creek. Viewing the range for the first time in years, Hatfield could see where Mexican rustlers would have fat pickings for their wet-back raids out of Chihuahua and Coahuila.

From Marfa on, the Concord had carried a full pay load—an Army officer's wife and family headed for Presidio on the Rio Grande, several whisky drummers, a Mexican sheepherder, and a couple of cowhands.

Because there was no mail or express box on the last leg of the run to Black Mesa, the coach carried no shotgun guard. The jehu, a salty veteran of many years on this Big Bend division, had been glad to have Jim Hatfield ride topside with him.

Morning sun was beating down on the two in the driver's seat as the red-and-yellow coach topped a rocky ridge for a long vista of Black Mesa's hazy length.

"Yonder," the driver said, gesturing with his whip toward a glint of sunlight on window glass some ten miles to the southward, "is where you're going, cowboy. Black Mesa. Looking for work, you'll find plenty on the spreads roundabout. Local outfits are having a hard time hiring riders these days."

Hatfield appeared to be concentrating on the cigarette he was building, his body jerking to the lurch and bounce of the bullhide-thoroughbraced coach. He was glad to have the opportunity of riding in the open air with the driver. Inside the coach it was like a bake oven, the canvas window curtains buckled tight to keep out the thick alkali dust.

"That so?" he commented idly. "Seems to be plenty of cows in these parts."

The driver nodded. "Plenty. But them wet-backers from across the Rio are whittling on 'em, more and more frequent. Raiding the gringo outfits wholesale when the moon's dark. Them *pelados* have emptied plenty of saddles north of the river, last year or two. Hope you'll be lucky, son. The wages you get won't pay for the risks you'll be—"

The gunshot which cut off the reinsman's words came without warning, an ear-riving crack of sound from a tornillo thicket on the lip of a cutbank level with the Concord's deck. A bullet, caroming off the metal rachet bar of the driver's foot-operated brake lever, thudded into the footboard in a splintery furrow.

The veteran stage tooler acted automatically. He knew instantly that that shot had been intended as a warning. He tramped hard on the brake and, standing up, hauled back on the reins to bring his six-horse hitch to a bucking halt.

HATFIELD knew better than leave his hands near the bone-stocked Colt .45s holstered at his thighs. He brought his arms up, peering through the sifting dust clouds to where a plume of gunsmoke boiled from the tornillo scrub.

Inside the stage, the Army officer's wife screamed, peal on peal. Hatfield heard one of the whisky drummers shout:

"Just a hold-up, ma'am. I been through a dozen of 'em. No cause for worry."

As the dust cleared, Hatfield and the

driver saw a bandana-masked man in a black oilskin slicker come from behind the tornillos, a cocked .45 in his fist. There came a rattle of stones on the other side of the road and, from the corner of his eye, Hatfield saw another road agent slide down the cutbank and jerk open the near door of the stage.

Thursting a sawed-off buckshot gun through the opening, the bandit warned:

"Everybody out, reaching! Nobody's going to get hurt if you follow orders."

The outlaw who had fired the warning shot spoke gruffly, his bandana mask puffing outward:

"You two boys can clamber down, one on each side of the rig. Jehu, unload the box."

The driver wrapped his lines around the jacob's staff on the footboard and commented drily, "No box in the loot this run. You boys drawed a blank. Not even a mail sack."

Hatfield climbed down over the left wheel, and the outlaw skidded down the cutbank to join him. The jehu dropped down on his side of the Concord, where the other bandit was lining the passengers up facing the bank.

"See if he's telling the truth about that box!" barked the outlaw beside Hatfield.

His partner, having satisfied himself that none of the passengers were armed, climbed topside.

He grunted laconically, "No box, no mail bags. You sure can pick 'em, hombre."

With the barrel of his six-gun the outlaw on the ground reached out to hook Hatfield's guns from leather, kicking them to the side of the road. As he bent near the Ranger he said in a hoarse, muffled whisper:

"Insist on getting out of the stage at the bottom of the grade. We'll pick you up. Got an extra horse for you. Remember the Alamo, Hatfield!"

The Lone Wolf stiffened in astonishment. Had he heard aright? Was this masked, slicker-clad stage-coach robber giving him the password of the Black Mesa rancher who had called on the Texas Rangers for help in winning a wet-back war?

"We drew a blank, then!" the outlaw who had spoken to Hatfield shouted to his partner, as he backed away from the Ranger. "We ain't the stripe to rob passengers of their watches and jewelry. We're after the big stuff or nothing at all!"

The sobbing women and children were climbing back aboard under the guns of the other wary outlaw. Jim Hatfield climbed back to the driver's seat with the jehu, who was chuckling triumphantly in his beard.

The two road agents climbed the cutbanks on either side of the stage and, as if by magic, vanished into the chaparral. The whole episode had lasted less than three minutes, and except for the bullet gash in the dashboard there was no sign that a hold-up had ever occurred.

Whistling a gay tune, the jehu whipped his team into motion.

Midway down the grade, Jim Hatfield cleared his throat and said unsteadily, "Reckon I'll have you let me off, driver. I don't cotton to leaving my six-guns behind. Matched pair."

The driver nodded understandingly and halted the coach at the foot of the short grade.

"I'll wait," he offered, "while you hoof back and get your artillery, son."

JIM HATFIELD shook his head. Climbing down to the ground he waved the driver on. On his face was a sheepish expression.

"I'll walk the rest of the way to town," he said. "I got a hunch them road agents well be plumb sorry they was so generous, and they'll waylay you again, aiming to collect a few wallets and gold watches."

The driver bent a queer stare at his passenger.

"Didn't ticket you for a yellow-belly," he grunted, and lashed the team into a run.

The Black Mesa stage vanished around a bend and the Lone Wolf was left standing alone on the sun-drenched road.

He rolled and lighted a cigarette and

was plumbing his chaps for a match when he heard a rustling in the mesquite thickets which hedged the side of the road. Two grinning cowpunchers in their middle twenties spurred into the open, trailing a dun saddle horse. All three mounts bore Rocking R brands.

The stage robbers were now divested of their disguises.

"You hombres chose a mighty strange way to make contact with me," Hatfield commented, reaching up to accept his six-guns which the tall puncher who had given the mystic password to him up on the ridge handed down to him. "How'd you know who I was?"

The cowboy chuckled, tossing Hatfield the reins of the spare mount.

"Our boss described you, Hatfield. Black hair, peculiar greenish eyes, six foot or better. None of the other passengers fit the description. And Cap'n McDowell had wrote us that you'd be riding today's stage from Marfa."

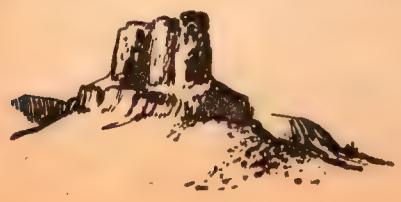
Climbing aboard the Rocking R saddler, Hatfield said, "I had instructions to get off at Black Mesa."

The other cowboy said quietly, "If you had, you wouldn't have lived long enough to get out to Rocking R, Hatfield. Seems the news about your coming to Black Mesa leaked out unbeknownst to the boss. She couldn't run the risk of having you ambushed on account of her sending for you."

Hatfield followed the two Rocking R punchers off the road, heading southeast.

"Boss of Rocking R is a she?" he asked, puzzled.

"Mary Romaine," the tall puncher said. "She'll go bankrupt if this wet-back rustling keeps on much longer. That's why she decided it was time to call on the Rangers for help. You'll like working for Mary, Hatfield. She's young and pretty."



CHAPTER II

Boss of the Rocking R

A FIVE-MILE overland ride from the scene of the fake stage robbery brought the Lone Wolf and his two escorts to the Rocking R headquarters. It was situated in a box elder grove at the head of a side valley opening on Black Mesa.

During the course of the hour-long horseback journey, the Rocking R punchers had supplied Hatfield with no information whatsoever regarding his situation, other than generalities about the Mexican rustler gangs invading Black Mesa at frequent intervals to steal cattle.

The tall puncher's name, it developed, was Crag Martinez; his partner, the Rocking R cavvy wrangler, was named Joe Wherry. They had had orders to make sure, at all costs, that Hatfield did not ride the Marfa stage into Black Mesa. Other than that, Martinez explained, whatever information Hatfield was to receive about his undercover law job would have to come from Mary Romaine.

Riding into the Rocking R, Hatfield was struck by the well-kept beauty of the ranch. Mary Romaine's house was a rambling flat-roofed adobe surrounding a patio where a fountain played in the center of a lily pond. The barns, *aguista*-thatched, were neatly whitewashed; the bunkhouse was of fieldstone and large enough to accommodate a sizable crew. Windmill, cattle pens and cavvy corral were in tip-top repair. The Rocking R obviously was a prosperous working ranch.

Dismounting in front of a horse barn, Martinez and Wherry took over Hatfield's mount.

"We'll see about getting your gear in town later," Wherry explained. "Stage driver will leave it at the Wells Fargo station for storage. Right now, you better rattle your hocks over to the big house and have a pow-wow with Mary."

"Nobody's going to get hurt if you follow orders. . . ."

Hatfield nodded vacantly, and headed down a palmetto-bordered lane toward the ranch house. A friendly collie came romping out to greet him. Fat hens scratched for worms alongside the road.

Crossing a well-kept lawn as green and flat as a billiard table, the Ranger caught sight of a girl emerging from the shadow of a long arcaded gallery which faced the patio on three sides, Mexican fashion. She would be Mary Romaine, of course, the ranch owner who had appealed for help in fighting rustlers from south of the Border. And Wherry and Martinez had not exaggerated in calling her pretty.

She was not far past twenty, Hatfield judged, with a supple, well-curved body and hair as jet as a raven's wing. She was wearing whipcord riding breeches, cavalry style boots and a tight-fitting orange-colored blouse which accented the voluptuous swell of her bosom. A snow-white stetson, held to her throat with a chin strap, hung against her shoulders.

"You'll be Ranger Hatfield, of course," she greeted, her full red lips revealing a flash of white teeth. "I'm Mary Romaine. Since my father was murdered by wetback Chihuahuans a year ago, I've been running this spread."

Hatfield doffed his stetson and accepted the girl's hand. She gave it a firm shake.

"Yeah, I'm Hatfield." He grinned. "Like I told your boys, you sure chose a startling way to get me to your ranch. That stage driver is plumb certain I'm a lily-livered coward, for refusing to ride on in to town on the stage."

Mary led him into the cool shade of the ramada. Entering a rustic-style living room with low-beamed ceiling and a mammoth fieldstone fireplace, she gestured to Hatfield to sit down on a horsehair sofa.

A *mestizo* servant appeared, carrying

a silver tray on which tall glasses of iced beer foamed and bubbled, and a dish of crisp dry tacos.

DRINKING thirstily, Hatfield waited for Mary Romaine to make the opening gambit in the pow-wow.

"The boys probably explained why I couldn't let you ride on in to Black Mesa as planned, Mr. Hatfield," she began gravely. "Your arrival was supposed to be a strict secret. I did everything possible to keep it so. At your Captain McDowell's advice."

"But the word leaked out?"

Sitting down beside Hatfield, the girl tucked her legs under her, little-girl fashion. The Ranger could not remember when he had ever seen anyone so ravishingly beautiful. As her punchers had predicted, it would be a pleasure helping Mary Romaine solve her difficulties.

"Seems so," Mary said. "Two days ago Colonel Bell, of the Broken Bell outfit across the valley from us, met Joe Wherry at the post-office in town. He said, 'Things must be getting pretty desperate when Mary calls in the Rangers, Joe'."

Hatfield scowled, eying the girl over the rim of his beer glass.

"That means," he said, "you've got a traitor on your payroll, Miss Romaine. Who'd you confide your plans to?"

"Mary," she said. "Right from the start. That's what everybody calls me." Her shoulders lifted and fell. "I told no one. I swear it."

Hatfield thought that over. Finally he said, "How did you get in touch with Ranger headquarters?"

"By telegraph."

Hatfield nodded. "There's your answer. There's where you made a mistake. The telegraph operator in Black Mesa must be a talkative kind of cuss."

Mary's eyes widened. They were the brownest, most limpid eyes Hatfield had ever looked into. Again he had to remind himself, as he had so often had to do before that as long as he wore a star in Texas, there was no room for romance in his hazardous life.

"A Broken Bell spy!" Mary Romaine whispered. "I should have known. I should have sent a sealed registered letter to Captain McDowell!"

Hatfield set aside his empty beer glass. "Why do you say a Broken Bell spy, ma'am?"

Mary's mouth clamped in a harsh, bitter line.

"I think the Broken Bell is out to bankrupt the Rocking R. The Broken Bell is the biggest outfit on the Mesa—runs twice as many cattle as my father did even in better days."

"But," protested Hatfield, "I thought the rustling was being done by renegades from across the Rio Grande?"

Mary nodded, her hands twisting a handkerchief on her lap.

"That's where our cattle go, yes—into Chihuahua. But I think the wet-backers are working hand in glove with the Broken Bell. The Colonel and my dad were rivals as long as I can remember. One thing that seems suspicious to me—the rustlers hit the Rocking R three times to one raid on the Broken Bell. I think those raids are done with the Colonel's full knowledge and consent—just to pull the wool over the eyes of the stupid sheriff here in the valley."

Hatfield settled back on the sofa, absently munching a crisp taco. The *mestizo* reappeared to refill his glass with creamy brew.

"My father," Mary went on, "was too proud to call in the Texas Rangers. But ever since he was drygulched last spring—he was out guarding a herd of our feeders which wound up in Old Mexico the night he was shot from his saddle—I've decided that pride can be pretty expensive."

She leaned forward, putting a hand on the Ranger's knee.

"I'm desperate, Jim Hatfield! I haven't met my pay-roll in three months. What's left of my crew stick with me through loyalty to Dad's memory."

Hatfield drawled, "I can hardly imagine a crew deserting a girl as beautiful as you when the chips are down—Mary."

SHE averted her eyes, cheeks coloring imperceptibly before the admiration in the lawman's gaze.

"The fact remains that I can't take many more wet-back raids," she said, with deep emotion. "And if the Rocking R goes under, you can bet who will pick up my paper and take over. Colonel Travis Bell! He'll control Black Mesa from rim to rim then."

After a long run of silence, Jim Hatfield said, "Got any ideas about how I can go about helping you?"

Mary turned to face him.

"I have, indeed. Ranger, the Broken Bell's short-handed this year. Black Mesa has a hoodoo reputation with riders—too many punchers have been shot down, on both ranches. I want you to ride over to the Broken Bell—today. This afternoon."

"As a fiddle-footed cowhand, hunting work? You mean you want me to sign on with Colonel Bell's crew?"

"Exactly. You can serve the Rocking R better on that spread than you can working for me. I'll get in touch with you from time to time, of course, to see what you've found out."

Hatfield asked curiously, "What do you expect me to find out, working for the Broken Bell?"

Mary Romaine was silent for quite an interval, as if having difficulty framing words to explain herself. Finally she said:

"You can find out whether the Broken Bell is working with the Mexican wet-backers, the next time my ranch is raided. Living and sleeping with the Colonel's crew, you'll know whether any of his men are away from the Broken Bell on the night the wet-backers strike."

Hatfield thought that over, also and he asked, "You have no real proof that Broken Bell is working with the renegades, Mary?"

"Nothing that would hold up in court, if that's what you mean. But who else stands to profit if the Rocking R goes to the wall? Only the Broken Bell."

"And if I do find out that the Colonel's riders are helping the wet-backs?"

Mary shrugged. "You're a Texas Ranger. Your testimony could put the whole Broken Bell outfit in jail."

Hatfield got to his feet.

"If this Colonel Bell knows you sent for a Texas Ranger, won't he hear about that stage hold-up today? And how one of the passengers got off the stage within five miles of your ranch? He might put two and two together, and—"

Mary smiled. "I've already arranged to have your gear at the Wells Fargo office picked up. The express agent is a friend of mine. If any Bell men come snooping around asking questions, he'll say you walked to town, claimed your gear and took the next stage out."

Hatfield caught sight of something then which had up to now escaped his notice. A diamond solitaire that twinkled on the third finger of Mary Romaine's left hand.

"You're engaged?" he asked, wondering at the stab of disappointment which touched him at the knowledge she belonged to another man.

"I am. To a rancher over on the Pecos."

Hatfield tongued his cheek thoughtfully. "How come he isn't around to help save your ranch, ma'am?"

Mary shrugged. "I refuse to burden my future husband with a range war. We will not be married until my affairs here in Black Mesa are in order." She stood up. "The *mozo* has a meal waiting for us in the patio, Ranger. You look as if some grub would do you good. Then Martinez will take you out to the remuda corral and give you your pick of any unbranded horse you wish—a horse which Colonel Bell can't recognize as having come from the Rocking R!"

CHAPTER III

Broken Bell Ranch

BLACK MESA was pooled with indigo haze and the sun was touching the western crags when Jim Hatfield

topped a ledge road leading to Colonel Travis Bell's ranch headquarters.

Behind him, following the section-line road which linked the Broken Bell with the cowtown of Black Mesa ten miles to the north, two riders were approaching the ranch. They probably would arrive within a few minutes after the Ranger.

Ever since he had spotted them, they had roused Hatfield's curiosity. He could only trust and hope that they had not seen him crossing the open range of the valley bottom on his way to intersect Colonel Bell's private road. A saddle bum such as he was supposed to be, hunting work, would hardly be riding over from Rocking R graze.

Mary Romaine's foreman, Martinez, had helped all he could to build up Hatfield's masquerade. The horse he had chosen, a nondescript blue roan gelding, carried a vented Rafter X brand, indicating that the mount had been purchased from an outfit east of the Pecos. Martinez had given the Ranger a bill of sale, using the name Jerry Poindexter, as proof that he had purchased the horse from a trader in Uvalde several months before.

His saddle, a Brazos-horned double-rigged hull, showed signs of much use, and was equipped with a slicker-clad bedroll like the one Hatfield had left on the Black Mesa stage this morning. There was a scarred old Winchester carbine in a basket-woven Mexican scabbard under one saddle fender.

Riding over from the bench rim, Hatfield saw that Mary Romaine had not exaggerated the Broken Bell's status as the leading cattle outfit in the valley. Colonel Bell's ranch house was a rambling tile-roofed building, twice the size of the Rocking R's, landscaped with native cactus and palo verde and tamarisk. An artesian spring supplied the ranch with water, so there was no need for a windmill. There were twice as many barns as on the Rocking R, and the bunkhouse was a pretentious one with wild rosebushes clambering over the lava rock walls.

Somewhere in the rear a blacksmith was making music on an anvil. Sleek horses rolled in the dust of a big cavvy corral. Smoke from a cookshack chimney lifted straight up into the dusk-tinted air, reminding Hatfield of an Indian signal.

Hatfield was dismounting alongside a concrete water trough to let his nondescript roan drink when a tall, angular Texan in a plaid shirt and flaring batwing chaps bowlegged out from a tool shed to greet him.

"Jeff Gill, foreman of the spread," he introduced himself. "Grubline rider, maybe?"

Gill's arrogant manner made Hatfield bristle. Calling a man a grubline rider was almost as bad as branding him outright as a saddle bum.

"Looking for work," Hatfield clipped. "Heard in Presidio the Broken Bell was hiring. Name's Jerry Poindexter."

Gill, a man in his early forties, thrust thumbs into shell-studded gun-belts girdling his flanks. Two staghorn-butted Colt .45s were slung for cross-draw at Gill's thighs. And seeing the jagged knife scar that ran along one clay-blue jaw, Hatfield mentally ticketed the Broken Bell foreman as a paid gunslinger rather than a man who had been hired for his range savvy.

"We're short-handed," Gill admitted. "Matter of fact Colonel Bell rode over to town this morning, hopin' to hire some riders. We got a roundup coming and not enough men to handle the drive, let alone the beef gather."

Hatfield gestured toward the rimrock. "Saw a pair of riders coming in. Might be your boss and a new rider. In case it is, where does that leave me?"

GILL rounded Hatfield's horse, sizing up the vented Rafter X brand on its rump. He ignored the Ranger's question.

"Uvalde county bronc," he commented. "You worked for the Rafter X?"

Hatfield shook his head. "Bought this roan from a trader in Uvalde. I'm from over in the Nueces brasada country."

At that moment the two riders to whom Hatfield had called attention topped the

bench rim. It now was in shadow as the sun vanished behind the western ridge.

"Colonel Bell," Gill informed. "Looks like he picked up a hand in town . . . Consider yourself on the pay-roll, Poindexter. I do most of the hiring and firing for the old man. Bunkhouse is yonder. Pick yourself a bunk and unroll your soogans. You'll hear the cookee hammering the triangle when it's time for grub."

Relief touched Hatfield, but he gave no outward sign of it. As Mary Romaine had predicted, he had encountered no difficulty in hiring on at the Broken Bell. Gill hadn't prodded him for personal information; he hadn't had to answer any embarrassing questions. Hatfield got the impression that even if he had been an owlhooter on the dodge, Gill would have signed him on anyway.

Hatfield was turning his blue roan into the remuda corral when Jeff Gill called him over to where Broken Bell's boss and the other rider were dismounting.

"Just hired this drifter, Colonel," Gill was saying as Hatfield walked over. "Jerry Poindexter, from the Nueces country. Poindexter, this is the boss, Colonel Travis Bell."

Shaking hands with the white-goateed boss of the Broken Bell, Hatfield had to admit that Colonel Bell did not fit the mental picture he had had of a range boss who was greedy for all the graze in the valley.

On the sunset side of sixty, Bell carried himself with a ramrod straightness which hinted of past military service. If that were so, then the title of Colonel was not an honorary one. He had kindly sky-blue eyes and a friendly grin, his entire manner in sharp contrast to that of his domineering, authoritative ramrod.

"Luck seems to be running my way," Colonel Bell drawled. "Haven't been able to hire any riders for months, and you're the second man I've added to the pay-roll today . . . This is Reg Dawe, from over New Mexico way. Hired him in town this afternoon. Dawe, shake hands with Jerry Poindexter."

[*Turn page*]

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Seeing Dawe at close range, Jim Hatfield instinctively decided he was shaking hands with an owlhooter. Dawe, a shifty-eyed hombre, wore a pair of Colt .44s in tied-down holsters. Guns with notches on their backstraps—the mark of a killer. On the dodge, Hatfield would bet his last blue chip. Getting work on an isolated spread which was only a short hop to the safety of Mexican soil.

"I explained to Dawe," Colonel Bell was saying, "that we have trouble with Mexican rustlers ever so often in this valley. I always explain to a new man that the job here holds certain risks which don't usually go with forty a month and found, which is all I can afford to pay. My foreman explained that to you, Poindexter?"

Hatfield shrugged. "He didn't have time to go into details, sir," he said. "But I'll take my chances. I've had more than one skirmish with wet-backers down in the Nueces country."

Dawe said noncommittally, "Same goes for me, Colonel."

Colonel Bell's smile showed his relief. "*Bueno,* then. You will get your work orders from Gill here."

A dozen riders were at the cookshack supper table that night. Sizing them up, Jim Hatfield reached the conclusion that Mary Romaine was not far off in believing that Colonel Bell hired his crew for their gun savvy. The Broken Bell riders were a gun-hung, hard-bitten lot, down to the youthful cavvy wrangler. It was not hard to imagine them working with Mexican renegades on a dark-of-the-moon rustling raid on Rocking R range.

The next morning, Hatfield was not surprised to find that Jeff Gill had paired him off with Reg Dawe for their first day's work.

"We got a water-hole to fence in, down on the south range," the foreman explained. "Only a gunshot's distance from the Rio Grande. This particular seep is poison—arsenic deposits. Got to fence it off to keep from losing cattle."

The job, he went on to explain further, would take several days. So Dawe and Hatfield were to take along grubsacks and bedrolls to be prepared to be absent from the home ranch for several nights. A pack-mule was provided for the extras.

Riding out, Hatfield was in a frustrated mood. Mary Romaine's sole purpose in having him hire out incognito to Broken Bell had been to put a Texas Ranger on the spot where he could detect any rustling activities in which the Colonel's riders might be engaged in. Now, ordered out on a job twenty miles from the Broken Bell to be gone several days, his value to the Rocking R would be completely nullified.

He wondered what would happen if the Chihuahua wet-back raiders did invade Black Mesa during his absence, and struck the Romaine ranch. He would have no way of proving that Broken Bell was in anyway involved.

Still, under the circumstances, he had no choice but to obey Gill's orders. It was logical that the Colonel's *ramrod* would want to get two new men out of the way, in case a rustling job was being planned. Not until Jeff Gill had had time to size up his new hands would he make any move to cut them in on any criminal activity.

Dawe proved to be a taciturn traveling companion. He seldom spoke, and never met Hatfield's eye. If Dawe hadn't been as new to Black Mesa range, as Hatfield was himself the Ranger might have suspected that Gill had sent the man along to ride herd on him. Or, for that matter, Dawe might not be a new hireling at all.

They reached the poison water-hole at mid-afternoon. It was on a slope less than a mile from the shadow-clotted canyon of the Rio Grande. Here, the mesa tapered to less than five miles in width. If any Rocking R cattle were shoved into Mexico this week, they would have to pass below this arsenic pool.

At some time in the past, a rock fence had been built around the toxic seep, but thirst-crazed cattle had broken down the barrier. Gill's orders were to replace the adobe-mortared stone fence with barbed wire, a spool of which was carried on the

pack-mule, with their provisions.

Buzzards flapped away at the approach of the two riders. The foul, red-necked scavenger birds had been gorging on the bloated carcass of a yearling bull which had drunk of the poisoned waters. The pool was rimmed with a deadly green scum where arsenic deposits had come to the surface. Inside the circle of the stone fence were many other cattle bones, testifying to the toll this pool had taken of Broken Bell stock.

Pitching their camp in a palo verde bosque further up the scantily timbered ridge, Dawe and Hatfield staked out their horses and pack-mule and agreed on how they would handle this job. Dawe would head upslope to chop down stunted jackpines for fence posts; Hatfield would start the back-breaking task of digging post-holes in the stone-hard adobe to circle the damaged stone wall.

It was tough, grueling work in this heat, but Hatfield was anxious to get the wire fence built and be on his way back to the Broken Bell. Every day he was away from the home ranch was a day wasted, so far as his Ranger assignment was concerned.

Reg Dawe returned to the camp at sundown, dragging a dozen jackpine fence-post at rope's end. He was a hard worker, Hatfield was pleased to discover. At this rate the fence should be in by day after tomorrow, meaning they would be away from the Broken Bell for only two nights.

SHORTLY after daylight the next morning they were back at work. Dawe had cooked breakfast while Hatfield had led the animals down to the creek for water, and returned with loaded canteens and waterbags. One sip of the poison pool's arsenic-laden water could kill a man.

Hatfield had a dozen posts set and was resuming work on post-hole digging when, shortly before high noon, the sound of a rifle shot higher up the slope startled him.

Tossing aside his post-hole digger, Hatfield peered up the mountainside, wondering if Reg Dawe had fired a signal of some sort. If he was in trouble, say if his ax had slipped and inflicted an injury—he would undoubtedly fire two more spaced shots—the time-honored distress signal of the Western frontier. It hardly seemed probable that Dawe would waste a .30-30 cartridge just to kill a rattlesnake.

More shots came, but they were closely-spaced, booming reports. The unmistakable sound of a six-gun being hammer-fanned in rapid succession. And the revolver shots were interspersed with the crackling reports of a saddle carbine.

Hatfield's partner *was* in trouble of some kind, up there in the jackpine scrub!

Sprinting up the slope, the Ranger raced into the campground, and at once saw that Dawe had not taken his saddle-gun to work with him this morning. The Winchester stock still jutted from the scabbard under the fender of Dawe's saddle.

But it had sounded as if Reg Dawe were fighting off an ambush attack. The firing had ceased now, though, up the ridge. An ominous quiet had settled down.

Jerking the Winchester from his own saddle-boot, Hatfield headed up into the jackpines. In a general way he knew where Dawe had been working. Levering a shell into the breech of his carbine, he bent low and hammered up the slope, following the skid marks Dawe had made yesterday in dragging his fence-posts down the mountainside.

The glint of sunlight flashing off the double-bitted blade of Reg Dawe's ax made Jim Hatfield veer off. And he came upon a small clearing dotted with fresh jackpine stumps and conifer slashings where Dawe had been at work trimming posts.

Then, at the far upper edge of the clearing, he caught sight of Reg Dawe. The puncher was sprawled face-down behind a gabbro boulder where he had apparently taken refuge against whoever had opened fire on him with a long-range gun.

Hatfield faded back, circling the edge of the clearing. Dawe had a six-gun in either hand, thumbs holding the knurled

hammers at full cock. Obviously he had been waiting for the drygulcher to show himself in the timber.

The next moment Hatfield was down on all fours, scuttling toward the boulder behind which Dawe was hiding.

He called out, "What's up, Dawe?" to let the man know he was coming up from behind. It was risky business approaching a gunman who was fighting for his life, ready to take a pot-shot at any moving bush.

Dawe did not reply. Another ten yards and Hatfield was crawling up beside the puncher. One look told him that Reg Dawe was out of the fight for keeps. Blood was seeping from a bullet-hole in his right temple where a rifle slug had pierced the skull, ranging down into his lungs.

Smoke still filtered from the muzzles of Dawe's six-guns, proof that he had fired the answering salvo at his attacker.

But Reg Dawe was dead. High in the Texas sky, *zopilote* hawks were already beginning to wheel on motionless pinions, spotting human carrion on this bleak mountainside.

CHAPTER IV

"He's Jim Hatfield!"

AN ALIEN sound reached Hatfield's ears, from higher up the slope. The rasp of an iron-shod hoof on exposed rock, a crashing of brush as a rider moved through the chapparal.

Dawe's ambusher, satisfied that he had made his kill.

Hatfield wriggled back into the jackpine thickets toward the south, straining his eyes to catch sight of the bushwhacker.

Almost at once a rider came into view, limned starkly against the skyline fifty yards up-slope. A Mexican vaquero, judging by his ball-tasseled sombrero and rainbow-hued serape slung over one shoulder.

There were too many jackpines in the way for Hatfield to get a good look at the Mexican's face, but he could see the flash of sunlight on silver tie-conchas which decorated gaucho pants with the seams split for an inlay of bright scarlet satin, vivid against the black velveteen.

The Mexican was mounted on a buckskin pony. Saddle and martingale were heavily spangled with silver ornaments. The rider was shoving cartridges into the magazine of his Remington repeater as he kept the buckskin moving along a ledge rim.

Hatfield lifted the walnut stock of his carbine to his cheek, lining his gunsights on that skylined rider. He meant to shoot to wound, in the hope of capturing the Mexican alive. There was little doubt in his mind but the fellow was one of the wet-back gang out of Chihuahua, scouting the Texas valley in advance of a night raid. Seeing two Broken Bell punchers this far south, working at the poisoned water-hole, he probably had made a try at knocking out of action two men he believed to be lookouts.

Gunsights lined on the Mexican's hip, Hatfield squeezed trigger. The empty snap of firing pin on a defective cartridge answered.

But the dry, metallic sound had reached the Mexican's ears. Just as Hatfield hastily levered another shell into the breech the man jerked his head up, then instantly raked his buckskin's flanks with big-roweled Spanish spurs.

Swinging his Winchester to follow the escaping Mexican, the Lone Wolf squeezed trigger again. And again a hollow click was the only sound.

Tossing the useless saddle gun aside with a bitter imprecation, Jim Hatfield jerked six-guns from holsters and slogged up the ridge on foot. Drumming hooves told him that the killer—if he *were* Dawe's bushwhacker—was in full flight, heading toward the Rio Grande.

In only moments Hatfield was scrambling up onto the quartz outcrop where the ambusher had been riding. From this vantage point he could look over the blue-green sea of jackpine scrub. A trailing

feather of dust picked out the angle of the Mexican's flight. Then the escaping killer broke into the open, directly opposite the arsenic pool. He was spurring at a dead run, making for the Rio Grande canyon.

Muttering another oath, Hatfield pouched his unfired six-guns. The range was over a hundred yards, too far to hope to reach with the Colts. Dawe's slayer had made a clean getaway! Had vanished into the shadow-filled slot of a dry wash. And Jim Hatfield believed he had seen his last of the silver-trapped outlaw.

Sweat burst from the Ranger's pores as he realized how open a target he had been himself, setting posts down there at the poisoned water-hole. Only by sheer luck had the Mexican chosen to ride up the slope and take a pot-shot at Reg Dawe first.

Grim-faced, Hatfield worked his way back to the clearing where Reg Dawe's corpse lay under a cloud of buzzing flies. An owlhooter this man may or may not have been, but he had fallen a quick victim to the Broken Bell hoodoo.

SUDDENLY Hatfield remembered the Winchester which Crag Martinez had handed him over at the Rocking R. One defective cartridge he could excuse, but hardly two in a row. If that gun had been working properly he would have had Dawe's killer roped and bandaged by now!

He returned to the spot where he had discarded the saddle gun and methodically ejected the remaining shells in the magazine. All the cartridges appeared to be new. The Winchester was in perfect working order. Why, then, the misfires?

Locating the first cartridge he had ejected, the slug which should have bagged his Mexican prey, Hatfield pried the copper-jacketed bullet from the casing and spilled the powder charge into the cup of his palm. The black granules did not have the greasy look gunpowder should have. He touched his tongue to the powder and tested it between his teeth, then spat it out.

He thought grimly, black sand. Somebody tampered with those cartridges before Martinez loaded that carbine.

Mary Romaine, it would appear, had unknowingly sent him on his way with a worthless saddle-gun. A quick examination of the other cartridges revealed that all the percussion caps had been tampered with, that powder grains had been replaced with sand.

An explanation came to Jim Hatfield, then. Traders who supplied ammunition to Indians and Mexicans often removed the powder charges. It was possible that Crag Martinez had purchased these loads from some intinerant peddler dealing in worthless stock.

Shaking his head, puzzled, Hatfield went back to Reg Dawe's corpse. He scared away a gaunt-necked vulture which had alighted on a nearby rock, and rolled a cigarette, debating what his next move should be.

His own life was in danger if he remained at this water-hole. The Mexican on the buckskin might well return with *compañeros* to finish the job of wiping out Colonel Bell's work crew.

Should be bury Reg Dawe before packing up and returning to Broken Bell? That might be the easiest way to handle it, but on the other hand a dead man would be tangible proof of why Hatfield had decided to pull out, leaving the water-hole fencing job unfinished.

He returned to the camp for Dawe's horse, and when he got back the vulture was hooking its talons in the dead man's shirt. A six-gun bullet knocked the predatory bird to one side in a flutter of feathers.

Revulsion knotted Hatfield's belly as he loaded Dawe's limp weight over his saddle. Dawe's fingers were locked immovably around the stocks of his six-guns and Hatfield made no attempt to remove them, only lowering the hammers as a safety precaution, knowing that when rigor mortis set in it might flex the dead man's trigger fingers to fire the weapons. This way, Colonel Bell would have proof that his new cowpuncher had died fight-

ing for his life.

He saddled his own dun and repacked the mule's load for the return trip to the Broken Bell. With luck, he might reach the ranch before dark.

Hatfield was again returning to the arsenic pool to pick up the post-digging tools when something whined past his head with the note of an angry hornet. Diving from saddle, the Lone Wolf had hardly hit the ground before the crack of a rifle shot reached his ears. So the Mexican *had* returned to make sure of a second victim!

Snaking Dawe's rifle from its scabbard, Hatfield scuttled over to the shelter of the stone wall. He triggered an experimental shot into the air and was rewarded with the violent recoil of Dawe's weapon. This rifle, at any rate, had not been rendered useless by tampering with ammunition.

A second bullet smashed into the rock wall over Hatfield's head, spraying his face with adobe dust and rock particles. The angle of the bullet, as well as the sound of the shot, told that whoever had fired it was holed up in the same barranca south of the water-hole where Hatfield had last seen the Mexican killer.

HATFIELD thought, snaking his way along the circular perimeter of the stone fence, I sure played this loco. That renegade waited, after all, in hopes I'd come back here!

He found a break in the stone wall which gave him a view of one end of the barranca. A vagrant dust cloud smoked up from below the walls of the dry wash. The Mexican was moving around over there, probably hoping for a glimpse of his target.

Minutes dragged, as each played a waiting game. The Mexican must know Hatfield was forted up here at the spring and he must also know his only chance would be to circle around, higher up, where he could get his victim into view.

To do that, the Mexican would have to show himself in the open. And this rifle of Dawe's could probably be depended on to sight on a target at a quarter of a mile, easily.

Minutes grew into an hour, forcing Hatfield to move to shade. He realized now that quitting this scene would be tantamount to commiting suicide. He was pinned down for as long as daylight held.

Once, along toward the middle of the afternoon, he thought he saw a movement in a patch of prickly pear well away from the barranca. He laid a shot into the cactus, and a road-runner broke into the open, dropping a wriggling lizard from its beak. The Lone Wolf felt foolish.

Then the dismaying thought occurred to him that the Mexican's gunfire might have reached the ears of a renegade crew camped on the far side of the Rio Grande. In that case he might soon find himself fighting heavy odds. The only thing he could do would be to duck into the open, get into saddle and make a run for it, abandoning Dawe and the pack-mule.

After an eternity the sun westered behind the crags above the arsenic pool and blue dusk began to flow into Black Mesa valley.

Hatfield got no further sight or sound of the Mexican ambusher. But he had every reason to believe the man was waiting over there in the barranca, ready to gun him down if he attempted to reach the ground-hitched horses and pack-mule.

Not until the first stars began to dot the Texas sky did Jim Hatfield leave the sanctuary of the rock wall. Shooting would be tricky, in this light. It galled him, pulling out this way, but it would be a needless risk to wait for the Mexican to be joined by other Chihuahua renegades.

I'll make a bet, Hatfield thought, that there'll be a rustling raid north of the Border tonight!

He reached the waiting horses without drawing a shot, tightened the cinch and mounted. For the first quarter of a mile away from the poisoned water-hole he kept the horses at a walk. Then, convinced that he was out of range of whatever danger had kept him trapped at the stone fence, he spurred into a gallop.

It took four hours to cover the twenty miles of rolling Mesa country back to Broken Bell. When he rode in the bunkhouse was brightly lighted. He halted the lathered horses at the water trough where he had met Jeff Gill yesterday.

A shout greeted him as he dismounted. Colonel Bell, taking his ease on the cool porch of the main house, had recognized his new rider back from the arsenic pool and was coming to investigate.

"Finish that fencing job so soon, Poindexter?" the Broken Bell boss inquired, emerging from the shadows. "Where's Dawe? Leave him at camp?"

Hatfield gestured toward the motionless shape of the dead man on the other horse.

"Mexican bushwhacked Dawe this morning while he was cutting fence posts, Boss," he reported. "I'd of been back a lot sooner but I got pinned down at the water-hole. Figured I'd better pull out while I could."

A SHOCKED oath escaped Colonel Bell's lips as he walked over to stare at Dawe's body in the moonlight. Over in the bunkhouse, unaware of the tragic news Hatfield had brought in, men were singing a song of the range to the accompaniment of a guitar.

Then a tall shape loomed up beyond the water trough and the foreman, Jeff Gill, joined them. He said testily, recognizing Hatfield;

"Don't tell me you got that fence built in one day, Jerry—" He broke off as he caught sight of the dead man tied over the saddle horse.

"The new man I hired in town yesterday, Jeff," Colonel Bell said hoarsely. "Hatfield. He didn't last long. And his death is on my conscience."

Jim Hatfield spun around.

"What name did you say?" he blurted. "Hatfield?"

Colonel Bell and Jeff Gill exchanged glances. The ramrod said hoarsely, "Your tongue slipped that time, Boss."

Bell met the level strike of Hatfield's eyes.

"Won't hurt to tell you now, I reckon, Poindexter," he said sheepishly. "This feller the Mexican killed wasn't named Reg Dawe. He was Jim Hatfield, the famous Texas Ranger. I had him come over to Black Mesa to work undercover for me, hoping to break up the wet-back rustling gang who've been robbing me blind."

Going over to the dead man, Colonel Bell reached in Dawe's hip pocket and drew out a leather wallet. From it he removed a five-pointed silver star enclosed in a silver ring—the time-honored badge of the Texas Rangers.

"Looks like the Mexicans must have known Hatfield," Gill observed. "Recognized him when he showed up. Captain McDowell made a mistake, sending such a well-known Ranger over here to help you, Colonel."

CHAPTER V

Working Blind

HATFIELD stared at the badge. It was a duplicate of the one he carried concealed in that pocket in the leg of his boot. He had never heard of a Ranger in McDowell's battalion named Reg Dawe.

"I been working with a Ranger—and never guessed it," he said hoarsely. "A Texas Ranger—"

Bell stared at him sharply. "Does that make any difference to you. You have any reason to fear a Ranger, Poindexter?"

Hatfield grinned. "No reason at all, Colonel. It—it just bowled me over, realizing Reg Dawe packed a law badge. I had sort of ticketed him for an owl-hooter."

Apparently mollified, Bell pocketed Dawe's badge. Jeff Gill thrust thumbs in shell belts and moved closer to Hatfield.

"Boss," the foreman said suddenly, "I'm just wondering if Poindexter here is telling the truth about Hatfield being

ambushed by a Mexican."

"What do you mean, Jeff?" Bell demanded. "Why should we question his word?"

Gill said hostilely, "I can't imagine Dawe telling this buckaroo he was a Ranger, but he might have, down there on that water-hole fencing job. We don't know anything about Poindexter except that he showed up straddling a Uvalde County bronc and claiming to be from the Nueces country. For all we know, maybe he was on the Rangers' wanted list."

Bell shook his head confusedly. "You're wrong, Gill," the old man said finally. "I had a long talk with Hatfield, riding out from town yesterday. I impressed him with the importance of keeping himself incognito. The reason I had you assign him to that job at the poisoned spring was to give him a chance to spy on the outlet of the valley so he could report any riders coming across from Mexico during the night."

Gill turned back to Hatfield. "Suppose you tell me what happened," he challenged. "Everything."

"Why not?" Hatfield countered, and in detail, told the circumstances of Dawe's death, and his long enforced wait at the water-hole when he had been covered by the Mexican's gun.

Only one important detail did he omit—that about the worthless ammunition in the saddle-gun he had carried with him to the Broken Bell yesterday. That would have brought the Rocking R into the picture, and Hatfield had not as yet been able to figure out any reason for Mary Romaine sending him on a dangerous mission with a worthless rifle in his saddle-boot.

Jim Hatfield was shaken with grave doubts about Mary Romaine now. If Colonel Bell had ridden to town yesterday to meet Reg Dawe, who had posed as Jim Hatfield, then it was possible that Colonel Bell, and not Mary Romaine, had been the Black Mesa rancher who had appealed to Ranger headquarters for help in fighting a wet-back war.

If that were so, why had Mary Romaine gone to such elaborate lengths as to kidnap him off the Marfa stage and send him to spy on the Broken Bell? And who had this mysterious Reg Dawe actually been? Undoubtedly somebody had planted him in Black Mesa to pose as the Lone Wolf when Colonel Bell showed up to meet him? That sounded like it might be Mary's work.

Colonel Bell's voice broke into the run of Hatfield's thoughts. "Well, you've heard Poindexter's explanation of what happened to Ranger Hatfeld, Jeff. What do you think now?"

Gill shrugged. "No way of proving whether he's lying or not, I reckon. He didn't bring back that Mexican's pelt. I'll agree with you that Hatfield was too cagey to tip anybody off that he was a Ranger."

COLONEL BELL laid a hand on the real Hatfield's shoulder.

"This business has been a terrible shock to both Gill and myself, son," he said gently. "Like I said, Hatfield would be alive now if I hadn't appealed to the Texas Rangers for help. I'll always feel I was responsible for his death. It—it's going to be hard, letting Ranger headquarters know the Lone Wolf was killed here on the Broken Bell."

Hatfield grinned crookedly. "Reckon Hatfield knew he was living on borrowed time, wearing the star, sir. I'm only sorry I didn't get a chance to bag that Mexican."

Bell sighed heavily. "Jeff, have the cavvy wrangler take care of the horses. I'll have the undertaker come out from town tomorrow to pick up Hatfield's body. I reckon McDowell will want him embalmed and shipped back to Austin. This news will throw the whole state of Texas into mourning, I reckon."

As Jeff Gill headed back toward the bunkhouse, Colonel Bell added heavily, "The cook will rustle you up a snack of bait, son. Turn in. You've been through a hellish experience. And you did exactly right, bringing Hatfield in."

Hatfield asked quickly, "You were personally acquainted with Hatfield, sir? You asked Austin to send *him?*"

Bell shook his head. "Never met the man before in my life. Captain McDowell—he's the chief Ranger at the State capitol—he and I arranged this secretly. Hatfield was to show up in Black Mesa by stage-coach instead of riding the famous stallion, he called Goldy, on the off chance that some owlhooter might recognize the horse, if not the rider. Everything possible was done to protect Hatfield's identity."

The Ranger said off-handedly, "Then if you wasn't acquainted with Hatfield personal, how'd you know Reg Dawe was him?"

Bill grinned bleakly. "Password. I met yesterday's stage. Nobody got off who answered Hatfield's description. I was in a bar getting a drink, when Reg Dawe braced me, gave me the password—'*Remember the Alamo!*' He said he'd got into Black Mesa a day early, just to play it safe. That password came direct from McDowell's headquarters, so I knew Dawe was Hatfield and he showed me that Ranger star."

Hatfield's heart slugged his ribs. Mystery was being added to mystery. He had found out what he had been wanting to know—that Colonel Bell knew the password. But so had Mary Romaine!

Crawling into his blankets an hour later, Jim Hatfield knew only one thing clearly. He was neck-deep in a range mystery. Either Mary or Colonel Bell was lying. And his own safety might well depend on finding out which was friend, which enemy. . . .

As Hatfield was washing up for breakfast next morning, Colonel Bell came over from the main house carrying two sealed envelopes. One was addressed to the county coroner in Black Mesa, the other to the Overland Telegraph operator in town.

"Jerry," Bell said huskily, "I want you to ride over to town today. Got several errands I need run."

"Yes, sir," Hatfield said, stropping a razor on his bullhide chap wing.

Bell's face was haggard, he noticed. The Broken Bell boss must have spent a sleepless night.

"This letter," the old Colonel went on, "instructs the local undertaker to come out and pick up Jim Hatfield's body. Tell him to rattle his hocks—dead men don't

A TALL TEXAS TALE

PANTYWAIST

HE WAS at least seven feet tall, and his booted feet dragged in the dust as he rode up main street astride a panther. His saddle was made of cactus. Held under his left arm was a wildcat, and in his right hand was a rattlesnake with which he was beating the panther.

Dismounting in front of the saloon, he tied up his beast with a length of barbed wire and clomped in to the bar.

"Gimme a drink, podner," he snarled to the bartender. "Just mix up a tumbler of whiskey with a jigger of arsenic, lye and sulphuric acid, then add a dash of nitroglycerine."

The bartender's eyes bugged. "Where you from, stranger?" he asked.

"Well, I been livin' over at Houston," was the reply, "but they run me out of town on account of I'm too sissified to suit 'em."

—*Jack Kytle*

keep in this climate."

"Yes, sir."

"The other letter is a message to Hatfield's chief in Austin, acquainting him with the tragedy. The disposition of Hatfield's remains will be up to Captain McDowell."

Hatfield accepted the envelopes and thrust them in his shirt pocket. This was eerie, hearing his own funeral arrangements being discussed.

"One other thing," Bell went on. "Hatfield's horse, Goldy, was to be brought to the Big Bend livery stable in town by a horse trader who works with the Texas Rangers. I'll be responsible for Hatfield's mount, keep him here until I get orders from Captain McDowell. You pick up the Ranger's horse and bring him back to the Broken Bell this afternoon."

AN HOUR after breakfast Hatfield was heading down the Mesa road toward town. When he was well away from the Broken Bell he reined up and opened the two envelopes to check, on the off-chance that Bell was communicating with outlaw confederates.

The notes told him nothing. The one to the coroner merely urged the official to make haste to the Broken Bell to pick up Ranger Hatfield's body. The telegram to Ranger headquarters was brief:

> REGRET TO INFORM YOU RANGER HATFIELD AMBUSHED BY UNKNOWN MEXICAN WHILE ENGAGED ON HIS MISSION. AM PICKING UP HATFIELD'S HORSE PENDING WORD FROM YOU REGARDING ITS DISPOSAL. HATFIELD'S BODY IN CUSTODY OF COUNTY CORONER AT BLACK MESA.
>
> BELL.

Hatfield struck a match and burned the telegram. He would be sending a wire to Captain McDowell, but it would be in code, in case the Overland Telegraph operator in Black Mesa was mixed up in this mysterious business.

Riding into Black Mesa, Hatfield located the county coroner in the rear of a furniture store. Within minutes that official was headed for the Broken Bell with a black-plumed hearse.

In the Overland Telegraph office, next door to the Wells Fargo stage stop, the operator on duty was a pimply-faced, emaciated youth who accepted Hatfield's seemingly innocuous message without question. But when Captain Roaring Bill McDowell deciphered that wire he would know that his chief Ranger was alive and working on a case, but that his impersonator had met death in short order.

Hatfield stalled for time, hoping that Mary Romaine or Crag Martinez might be in Black Mesa for a rendezvous. At the Wells Fargo station he learned that his warbag, sacked saddle and bedroll had been picked up yesterday by a Rocking R rider.

When a couple of hours elapsed and Hatfield saw no trace of a Rocking R rider in the cowtown, he realized that further delay might call for explanations at Broken Bell. So he headed for the Big Bend livery, the largest in town, and announced that he had come for the golden sorrel stallion he had seen rolling in the dust out in the corral.

"The one named Goldy that that horse trader left here yesterday?" The hostler grinned. "Don't mind telling you, son, you got yourself a horse there. 'Tain't often them foot-loose horse traders have any stock worth dickering on, but you drawed yourself a prize."

When the hostler had gone to rope Goldy and bring him out, Hatfield picked up a copy of the *Black Mesa Tribune*, a weekly newspaper which had just left the press this morning. He scanned the columns for a story about the hold-up of the Marfa stage and found it on an inside page. Two masked bandits, it was reported, had jumped the Concord ten miles north of Black Mesa, but had refused to loot the passengers of their personal possessions when they discovered the coach was not carrying an express box or mail sacks. The article made no mention of the fact that one of the passengers on the stage had left to walk to town. Apparently the driver hadn't mentioned that.

Another headline over a story tele-

graphed from Pecos, interested Jim Hatfield. The notorious outlaw Comanche Joe Brandywine had been arrested in Mentone by Texas Rangers while en route to rob a bank in Fort Stockton.

Half an hour later Jim Hatfield was riding back toward the Broken Bell with his own saddle horse in tow. Barry DeLane had delivered the mount on schedule and by now was on his way to Presidio, a deputy U.S. marshal posing as an itinerant horse trader.

Midway along the Broken Bell road, Hatfield pulled off to let the macabre black hearse pass. It lifted the hackles on the nape of his neck, knowing that the corpse in that plain pine coffin was supposed to be Jim Hatfield.

Who *had* Reg Dawe been? The fact that he had met death on the Broken Bell could mean many things. It could mean that Mary Romaine had stationed Reg Dawe in town to pose as a Texas Ranger, to prevent Colonel Bell from getting wise that Hatfield had left the Marfa stage. But it could also mean that Colonel Bell, aware that he was hiring a lawman planted on his spread to spy on rustling activities, had tipped off the Mexican renegades to dispose of Reg Dawe.

Most of all, where had Dawe picked up a genuine Ranger badge?

Any way Hatfield looked at the problem, he ran up against a blind wall of mystery. He might be riding toward an unmarked grave right now, in returning to the Broken Bell.

But every time he revolved the puzzle in his mind, he kept remembering the tampered-with cartridges he had brought away from the Rocking R. He kept trying to judge Mary Romaine as against Colonel Bell, and was forced to admit that Colonel Bell impressed him as the more honest of the two. Mary Romaine's exotic beauty might well conceal a killer's heart. That had happened many, many times in history.

Nearing Colonel Bell's ranch in the late afternoon, Hatfield came to a decision. Mary Romaine, for some obscure reason, was using him as a pawn in a range war that was building up here in Black Mesa valley. When the time was ripe, Hatfield decided, he would lay his cards on the table in front of Colonel Bell, and take his chances that he had guessed right.

From now on his own life might hinge on the accuracy of his ability to appraise human character!

CHAPTER VI

Night Riders

SLEEP came hard for Jim Hatfield that night, which was unusual for a man who had trained himself to relax in off-duty moments.

Having made a decision to come clean with Colonel Bell, he had found it difficult, after supper, not to approach the Broken Bell boss in the main ranch house at once and put the old man's mind at ease regarding the murder of Jim Hatfield's impersonator. But the matter was taken out of his hands when he overheard Jeff Gill remark that the boss had ridden into town, hoping to pick up another rider to replace Reg Dawe on the crew.

Shortly before midnight, lying awake in the Broken Bell bunkshack, Hatfield heard Colonel Bell return from Black Mesa, turn his horse into the cavvy corral and enter the ranch house.

The Lone Wolf decided, first thing in the morning I'll find out the truth about this smoldering range war between the Colonel and Mary Romaine's outfit across the valley.

Sleep came to Hatfield then. He was not sure what roused him, an hour or so later. Some vagrant sound in the bunkhouse?

Without moving, he keened the room to pick up that sound. It came again, faintly audible above the chorus of snoring men —the jingle of a spur chain.

A faint draught of air touched Hat-

field's cheek as the bunkhouse door was opened on noiseless, oiled hinges. He heard a padding noise, as of sock-clad feet on the packed earth floor, as two or more Broken Bell riders slipped out of the building. Then the door was eased silently shut.

The remaining punchers, exhausted by a hard day's range work, slept on.

Swiftly Hatfield crawled out of the blankets, donned shirt and levis, socks and stetson. Buckling on his double gunbelts, he picked up his spurred cowboots and tiptoed across the room, trying to remember the location of the potbelly stove and the card tables.

He managed to skirt them, and quickly then was letting himself out the door. Moonlight, filtering down through the leafy *alamoso* trees, revealed the prints of four sets of socked feet leading away from the bunkhouse, plain to see in the dust. Four riders had left the bunkhouse in great stealth, and their tracks veered away in the direction of the cavvy barn.

Hatfield slipped along the side of the bunkhouse and, keeping to deep shade, worked his way to the barn. Inside, he could hear surruptitious sounds of squeaking leather as men made cinches tight, heard the pawing of horses, occasional low-voiced comments.

Then, skirting the barn to the back wall, Hatfield reached it in time to see four riders leading horses out of the barn, keeping out of sight of the ranch house.

Hatfield knew only one of them by name—Jeff Gill, the ramrod. All four men mounted in utter silence and filed along the corral fence, bound in the direction of the valley.

Heart slugging with excitement, the Lone Wolf ducked into the barn and threw a saddle on Goldy. If he could trail Gill's foursome successfully tonight he would need a dependable horse under him. Whatever the ramrod was up to, he was making sure his departure from the Broken Bell was secret.

This, Hatfield realized as he led Goldy out of the barn and stepped into stirrups, was exactly what Mary Romaine had instructed him to watch out for. Trailing any Broken Bell riders who took to night riding.

Because he had to keep his distance it was difficult to keep sight of the riders in the dark, but he could tell they were heading for the rimrock road down into the lower valley. Hatfield kept Goldy at a walk until the last of the four riders vanished below the rim. Then he spurred into a long lope.

NEARING the rimrock where the road dipped over the edge of the bench he pulled up again, not wanting to present a sky-lined target in case he had overtaken Gill's horsemen. But there was no need for such caution. The riders—or rather the moon-gilded dust stirred up by their mounts—were in plain sight down on the valley floor, heading diagonally southeast.

Hatfield put Goldy down the ledge road. He could safely ride in pursuit because Gill and his men would not be able to see a rider following them because of the thick dust kicked up by their own passage.

For the better part of an hour the Lone Wolf kept to the trail. When he crossed the creek, Gill and his men were a scant quarter-mile ahead of him.

West of the creek was Rocking R range. What business would Broken Bell punchers have on Mary Romaine's ranch in the dead of night, if skullduggery were not afoot?

Suddenly the dust clouds ahead were missing, and gone was the steady drumbeat rhythm of horses' hooves on the sod. For a moment Hatfield knew panic. Had Jeff Gill spotted him and ordered his men to fort up?

Then he saw the dark gulf on a side canyon creasing the eastern hills in the direction of the Rocking R headquarters, and drifting banners of dust told him Gill had entered that canyon.

Hatfield was short-cutting in that direction, making a beeline toward the defile where Gill had vanished, when suddenly he reined up. Off to the south, a

group of riders—twenty or more—had abruptly appeared from the cottonwoods and willows which lined the creek. They were better than a mile off but were heading straight for the side canyon into which the Broken Bell riders had disappeared.

Rocking R guards, posted to guard Mary's cattle, was the first thought to cross Hatfield's mind. Then he remembered that Mary's ranch was shorthanded this summer. She would not have that many riders on her entire pay-roll, let alone being able to spare that many for night-guard patrol.

The larger group of riders disappeared in the side canyon in single file, leaving no rear guard. Hatfield urged Goldy forward, ears strained for a break of gunshots which would indicate that Jeff Gill was in trouble from the rear.

He avoided the open mouth of the gulch. The riders who had been waiting in the river brush might have posted a lookout there. Instead, he swung parallel to the canyon for half a mile, before cutting due south toward the near rim.

Hatfield was giving Goldy a breather when he heard cattle bawling, the sound muffled by distance, but unmistakably coming from the canyon. He got the meaning of that sound now. Mary Romaine must have had a beef herd bunched inside that canyon for safe keeping.

Fifty yards from the brink of the canyon he dismounted to ground-tie Goldy. Then, guns palmed, he headed through the cactus clumps and buckthorn brush toward the rim.

Distinctly to his ears came a sudden break of gunshots—not more than a half-dozen reports, but coming from deep inside the canyon. The bawling increased, coming nearer and with it a clacking rumble of cloven hooves stampeding toward the valley.

The shooting told its own story. Whoever was guarding the Rocking R herd had been cut down. But by whom? Jeff Gill and his Broken Bell night riders, or the larger party which had ridden into the canyon later?

Then the vanguard of the stampeding herd came in sight around a bend below the spot where Hatfield crouched. Moonlight winked on curved horns. The sounds of stampede rose to deafening proportions as the russet-brown tidal wave of livestock swept past Hatfield's lookout point.

THE herd was a relatively small one, perhaps two hundred head, mostly sleek feeders and she-stuff. It was impossible to read any brands in that blurring mass of hooves and horns, but undoubtedly those cattle belonged to the Rocking R.

In the dust of the drag came the punchers. Mexican wet-backers, to judge from the high-coned sombreros they wore, the serapes fluttering in the wind. Then Hatfield recognized Jeff Gill, bracketed by Chihuahuan vaqueros.

No prisoner of wet-back renegades, though, the Broken Bell foreman! Hatfield could hear Gill's bantering voice, speaking to the night riders in Spanish.

Hatfield had seen enough. He holstered his guns, crawled away from the canyon rim and sprinted back to his stallion. Vaulting into leather, he headed along a ridge slope toward the valley.

A moment more and he saw the stampeding cattle pour out of the canyon mouth and begin fanning out on the valley floor. Behind them came the Mexican rustler gang, spurring at a dead run to cut stragglers back into the herd, and head the cattle in the direction they wanted them to go before they could reach the creek and ford across onto Broken Bell graze.

From half a mile away, Jim Hatfield had a panoramic view of the rustling operation. He could not identify Gill or the other Broken Bell men amongst those fast-moving riders, but he knew he was witnessing as expert a bit of mass rustling as he had ever run across.

Within a quarter of an hour the herd, the initial stampede spent, were expertly bunched and started toward the Rio Grande. By daylight, every last head would be across into Mexico.

Jim Hatfield's one grim thought was, And to think I was on the verge of showing Colonel Bell my hole card!

It was obvious now that Gill and his men had left the Broken Bell on a definite prearranged mission, as spotters for the waiting band of wet-backers out of Mexico. It would have been impossible for the Mexicans to have known which of the dozens of Rocking R side canyons might yield a harvest of stolen beef. That had been Gill's job, scouting the placement of Mary Romaine's cattle in advance, then showing the Mexicans where to strike.

Mary had been right then. The Broken Bell was working with the Chihuahua renegades. Tonight, at least four of the Colonel's crew had taken an active part in a raid.

For a time, Hatfield debated whether to ride directly to Mary and report what he had seen. Undoubtedly the raiders, or perhaps Gill's advanced guard, had shot down the guards the Rocking R had left with the herd in that box canyon.

Finally Hatfield decided to return to the Broken Bell. It would be interesting to see whether or not Gill and his men returned to the bunkhouse tonight. If they didn't, if the four bunks were empty tomorrow morning when the cook sounded the breakfast triangle, then it would mean that the rest of Colonel's Bell's crew were in the know.

Why, then, the secrecy with which Gill had slipped out of the bunkhouse with his men? Could it have been because of the presence of Hatfield—or Poindexter, rather—in the crew—a new and unproved man?

With the sounds of horses and cattle fading in the distance toward the Rio Grande, Hatfield reforded Black Mesa Creek and lined out across Colonel Bell's graze toward the ranch. On reaching the top of the ledge road, he could see no sign of Gill and the others returning.

He swung wide to approach the horse barn from the north, leading Goldy the last hundred yards. Unsaddling, he gave his sorrel stallion a quick rub-down. It would not do for hostile eyes to see sweat stains on a horse, known to be the property of a Texas Ranger, in the morning.

IN THE bleakness of the false dawn Jim Hatfield slipped back into the bunkhouse. He undressed hurriedly and slid into his bunk, positive that he had not awakened any of the sleepers.

A half-hour later he heard the cook crawl out and plod to the cookhouse to get breakfast. The eastern skyline was beginning to show crimson when the bunkhouse door opened again and Jeff Gill and his night riders entered.

Sunrise came in some twenty minutes, by which time Colonel Bell's foreman and the other four men who had ridden with him were apparently asleep in their bunks. That might be profoundly significant. It could mean that not all of the Broken Bell crew were aware that the spread had a tie-in with Mexican wet-backers.

The clang of the triangle brought the crew tumbling out of their blankets, Hatfield with the rest. But even as he glanced surreptitiously around he realized that there was no way for him to identify the three men who had accompanied Jeff Gill on last night's sortie across the Rocking R boundary.

During breakfast, Hatfield noticed nothing unusual. Gill appeared fresh, joshing with his men, as if he'd enjoyed an unbroken night's rest.

"Poindexter," the foreman said to Hatfield as the men were filing out of the cookshack to begin their day's work, "you'll have to finish that fencing job down at the poison hole by yourself. If you'd rather draw your time, fair enough."

Hatfield shrugged. "You're the boss, Gill. But if I spot anything that looks like a Mexican within a mile of that water-hole, I'll start shooting."

Gill grinned. "You won't have any trouble. Whoever was doing the shooting before knew they were after a Texas Ranger. With that Hatfield gone, they

won't show up again."

Hatfield was heading toward the horse barn when he heard a commotion in front of the ranch house. Turning around to discover the reason for the shouting voices, he saw Mary Romaine and her ramrod, Crag Martinez, sitting their horses before the house.

Broken Bell men were converging on the scene. The two Rocking R riders alighted from well-lathered horses, proof that they had crossed the valley at break-neck speed.

Crag Martinez' shouts brought Colonel Bell out of the house. As Jim Hatfield joined Gill and the Broken Bell waddies grouped around the Rocking R pair, he heard Mary Romaine's furious voice speaking to the Colonel.

"That's right, Colonel! Wet-backers hit Ocotillo Canyon last night and drove off nearly three hundred head of my best beef!"

Colonel Bell wiped his perspiring face with a sleeve.

"Mary, I'm downright sorry to hear that. If only we had men enough to pool forces and guard our cattle—"

Crag Martinez said angrily, "We lost two boys in that raid, Colonel. The third guard, Joe Wherry, managed to slip away and ride in to tell us the news. And it's news you won't want to hear, Colonel."

A hush fell over the Broken Bell riders. The Colonel asked harshly, "What do you mean, Crag?"

Mary Romaine shouldered her way over to stand defiantly in front of Bell. "Joe Wherry saw your brand on one of the raiders' broncs last night, Colonel. That proves Dad was right!"

Colonel Bell's goateed jaw sagged in bewilderment. Or was it well-feigned bewilderment? If that man had any guilty knowledge of his foreman's night ride, he was a consummate actor.

"I don't savvy your drift, Mary," the old man wheezed. "What do you mean, your dad was right?"

MARY ROMAINE said in a more controlled voice, "Dad went to his grave thinking the Broken Bell was helping those Mexican wet-backers raid the Rocking R. What happened last night proves it!"

Jim Hatfield was staring at Jeff Gill's profile as Mary flung her challenge. By no flicker of an eyelash nor twitch of a cheek muscle did the Broken Bell foreman betray his guilty knowledge.

"Mary," old Colonel Bell said finally, "I don't know what to say. Joe Wherry was mistaken, of course. No Broken Bell rider could have been in last night's raid. I'll swear that on oath."

Crag Martinez barked frenziedly, "Wherry didn't say one of your riders was in that wet-back gang, Colonel! But don't call Mary a liar when she says a Broken Bell brand was on one of their horses, because Joe Wherry saw it!"

Hatfield saw Jeff Gill's lips tighten grimly. The Ranger knew what a shock it had been to the man, hearing that they

[*Turn page*]

Nagging Backache Sleepless Nights...

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had let a Rocking R rider get away from the canyon last night. Gill would be hearing from Colonel Bell about that disastrous slip.

"Listen, Mary," Colonel Bell panted hoarsely, "I'm going to tell you something. Something that's been a strict secret between my ramrod and myself. I realize that you and I cannot fight those wet-back raids alone, with our limited crews. So I—"

"So you what?" Mary Romaine snapped bitterly.

"So I called in the Texas Rangers. Jim Hatfield himself."

Mary Romaine's eyes left the Colonel's craggy face for an instant, and came to rest on Jim Hatfield standing in the background. No sign of recognition came to the girl's face. Hatfield moved his head slightly in negation, warning her to make no betraying sign.

Mary swung her gaze back to the Colonel.

"I don't see any tin stars in sight," she retorted.

Bell's shoulders lifted and fell. "As proof of my good faith, I sent to the Rangers for help," the old man went on doggedly. "Jim Hatfield — the most famous Ranger of them all—got here two-three days back. He was murdered! His body is down at Coulson's undertaking parlors this minute."

Surprise flickered in Mary Romaine's eyes. Automatically her glance shot over to Jim Hatfield. She hardly seemed to hear Colonel Bell say:

"If I was in any way connected with those wet-back raids, Mary, would I call a Ranger in to help track them down?"

Crag Martinez had spotted Jim Hatfield in the group of Broken Bell punchers now. He said hoarsely, "You say Ranger Hatfield was murdered? How?"

Colonel Bell made a gesture, off to the southward.

"I sent him down to that arsenic hole this side of the Rio Grande. He was supposed to be fencing off the pool to keep my stock out of there. In reality Hatfield was watching for Mexican raiders entering the valley. But somehow the Mexicans found that out. They bush-whacked him."

Jim Hatfield was astonished when he saw Mary Romaine go chalk-white. She swayed slightly, hands fisting at her sides.

Colonel Bell went on gravely, "I don't know how Hatfield's identity leaked out, but it did. He came here disguised as an ordinary cowhand named Reg Dawe. He—"

The Colonel broke off, leaped forward with a sharp cry as he saw Mary Romaine's knees suddenly buckle. The girl crumpled at Crag Martinez' feet in a cold faint.

CHAPTER VII

Goldy's Betrayal

THE Rocking R foreman stooped swiftly to lift the unconscious girl, into his arms.

"Stand back, everybody!" Martinez bellowed. "Mary's hit the end of her rope. She knows last night's raid is going to bankrupt her! She's tuckered out from riding over here this morning. Stand back—give her air!"

Colonel Bell said, "Carry her into the house. I'll rustle up smelling salts."

Jeff Gill suddenly turned to his crew. "Break it up, you wall-eyed leppies!" he shouted. "Get to your jobs. Give the boss time to talk things over with Mary and she'll be all right."

Confusion roiled in Jim Hatfield's brain as he headed back toward the barn. Mary Romaine was hardly the fainting type. She was undoubtedly a skilled horsewoman, having been born and bred on a ranch, so the pounding she had taken in riding over from the Rocking R this morning could hardly have accounted for what had happened. It was hearing of Reg Dawe's murder that had dropped her!

He killed half an hour loading the

pack-mule, preparatory to starting for the poisoned water-hole as per Gill's orders. But he had no intention of making that trek. Once out of sight of headquarters, he would cross the valley and wait for Mary Romaine to return to the Rocking R. He had to talk with the girl who had sent him to the Broken Bell.

He had the pack-mule loaded and had almost reached the bunkhouse to roll his soogans when Crag Martinez emerged from the ranch house and strolled in his direction. It was obvious from the Rocking R foreman's furtive side glances that he wanted to talk with Hatfield. The Ranger went on inside.

The bunkhouse was deserted. Hatfield was spreading his bedroll on a scrap of tarp when Crag Martinez stepped in.

"Mary's rallied around," Martinez said, in a harsh whisper. "Colonel's plying her with black coffee. I reckon you know why she keeled over?"

Hatfield shook his head. "She knew I was still safe," he said, "so it wasn't that. You know the answer, Crag?"

Martinez glanced nervously around. He lowered his voice almost to a whisper. "Reg Dawe's death," he said. "That hit her where it hurt. Mary was engaged to marry Reg Dawe."

Hatfield blinked. This news had a shattering impact. He had guessed all along that the man who had taken his identity had some connection with Mary Romaine, but the knowledge that she and Dawe were betrothed came as a bombshell.

"She had Dawe planted in town to make out he was you," Martinez went on. "To keep Colonel Bell from meeting that stage and then wiring Ranger headquarters that you hadn't shown up. That's simple enough to understand, ain't it?"

Hatfield's jaw hardened.

"It's clear as mud," he snapped. "Mary told me she had sent for Ranger assistance. Now are you trying to tell me—"

A faint grin touched Martinez's bronzed face. "What she didn't tell you is that Colonel Bell telegraphed your boss in Austin, too."

"You mean to tell me," Hatfield gasped, "that both Broken Bell and Rocking R sent for me—at the same time?"

Martinez shook his head. "Mary spoke first. Somehow, Bell found that out. So to cover his tracks, to make it seem like he wanted a Ranger in the valley, too, he telegraphed Captain McDowell. That's why Wherry and me held up that stage. We knew we had to beat Bell to the punch. The only way to do that was to plant a fake Ranger in Bell's wickiup."

Hatfield nodded slowly. "I can see why the news of Dawe's death hit Mary so hard," he admitted. "But Dawe was carrying a Ranger badge. Where did that come from?"

MARTINEZ had a ready explanation. "Dawe used to be a Ranger—out of Menard Barracks—before he quit to go into ranching. Mary couldn't use any of us Rocking R men for the job. Dawe ain't known around here, though. That's why Mary got her intended to hire out to Bell and claim he was Jim Hatfield. And now Dawe's dead, drygulched by one of Bell's waddies!"

"No," Hatfield contradicted. "I saw that killing, Crag. You can tell Mary the Broken Bell had nothing to do with it. Not directly, anyway. The killer was a Mexican."

Martinez grinned bitterly. "Sure he was a Mexican. Didn't Mary tell you in the beginning that Bell was working with them Mex wet-backers? What happened last night proves that."

Hatfield opened his mouth with the intention of relaying the information to Mary, by way of her foreman, that he had spotted Jeff Gill on last night's raid across the valley. But at that moment a Broken Bell wrangler ducked into the bunkhouse after a sack of tobacco and Crag Martinez made a quick exit.

Shouldering his bedroll, Hatfield headed for the horse barn. He was close to believing that this case was finished. Definitely, Colonel Bell's foreman was implicated, and at least three of his crew, in the wet-back raids. But as yet he had no definite proof that Bell himself was back

of that conspiracy.

He took his stock saddle off its peg and went out to the cavvy corral to rope a mount from his Broken Bell string. Foreman Jeff Gill was leaning on the corral fence, moodily staring into nothingness.

Hatfield knew what was bothering the foreman. Gill had bungled things last night by not wiping out the Rocking R guard to the last man. Joe Wherry, escaping the killers had turned up damaging evidence against the Broken Bell.

Hatfield unbuckled his lass'-rope from the pommel, shook out a loop, and climbed into the corral, searching the horses there for a bronc to saddle.

Across the corral, Goldy headed up and greeted Hatfield with a loud whicker. Dismay struck Hatfield as he saw the magnificent stallion break away from a group of saddlers and come prancing in his direction, kicking his heels playfully. Any man who knew anything about horses at all would know that Goldy—a horse belonging to a noted Texas Ranger—recognized Hatfield.

Goldy trotted up and nuzzled Hatfield affectionately. Thinking fast, the Ranger turned to look at Jeff Gill. He surprised a look of complete concentration on the foreman's face.

"This is the primest-looking hoss in the bunch, Jeff," Hatfield laughed, trying to fend off Goldy's overtures. "Pity he can't be rode."

Gill's eyes narrowed to slits. He straddled the top rail and jumped down into the corral, hitching his gun-belts as he stalked over to where Goldy was rubbing his muzzle at the pockets of Hatfield's chaps.

"That horse knows you from some place Poindexter!" Gill's voice had the reptilian quality of a snake's hiss.

Hatfield was aware of a sinking sensation in his belly.

"He ought to," the Ranger said. "The boss had me bring him over from town, remember?"

Gill bit his lip, staring at Goldy. Suddenly, without warning, the man jerked a Colt sixgun from leather and swung it to a level pointing, aimed at Hatfield's chest.

"That horse," he said coldly, "belonged to a Texas Ranger, Jim Hatfield. But a blind man could see he knows you as well as he did—Reg Dawe."

Staring at the bore of Gill's gun, Hatfield said half-jokingly, "No cause to draw on me, Gill. Reason this horse is acting this way, I gave him an apple in town. He's after another one. That's all."

GILL shook his head, scowling as if trying to figure something out.

"You were with Reg Daw when he was murdered. By a Mexican, you claim. I say different! Poindexter, I'm telling you that you were acquainted with Reg Dawe before you hit Black Mesa. You knew Reg Dawe was Jim Hatfield—and you killed him!"

Hatfield swallowed hard. He saw murderous lights kindling in Gill's beady orbs, knew he was but seconds away from being shot down in cold blood.

"Only one thing wrong with that, Gill," he said desperately. "If Hatfield and me were friends, why would I have killed him?"

A muscle twitched on Gill's cheek. The knuckle of his trigger finger whitened to pressure.

"Off-hand, I'd say because you're working with that wet-back gang Hatfield came to—" He broke off with a harsh gasp as a new thought struck him. "Oh . . . That's it! Good God, *you're* Jim Hatfield yourself!"

His gun was coming up again, leveling, as a woman's voice lashed out at him from the corral fence:

"Gill, drop that gun! I don't know what's going on between you two, but drop the gun. You're covered." Mary Romaine's voice!

Jeff Gill froze, muscles ridging his cheeks. He let the Colt slide from his fingers finally. His bleak eyes seemed to say to Hatfield, There'll be another time. Then he turned to look at the Rocking R owner who was peering at him through bars of the corral, a .45 steadied on a

pealed cottonwood pole, aimed straight at him.

"You're off your range, Miss Romaine," Gill said throatily, but he did not argue.

He stalked over to the fence and climbed it, dropping down beside Mary. Hatfield could not be sure if he spoke to her. Then he saw Jeff Gill stride off toward the bunkhouse.

Hatfield scooped up Gill's gun from the dirt of the corral, the gun he knew had been within a shaved second of blasting him into eternity. Time here now was precious. Gill might be back to cause more trouble, and he had to talk with this girl who had sent him to the Broken Bell.

His mind was not yet made up about Mary Romaine, but none of that indecision showed in expression or voice as he walked over to the fence to face her.

"You saved my hide, Mary. Thanks. Gill was all set to gun me down."

Mary holstered her gun. "But why?" she asked. "Have you—found anything out? About last night's raid on my beef, maybe?"

Hatfield said "Gill and three other men helped those Mexicans last night, yes. The reason Gill pulled a gun on me is because he's wise now. He knows I'm Jim Hatfield. My horse told him that."

Mary winced, as if his words reminded her of Reg Dawe, the fiancé whom she had brought over to this valley to his death.

"Listen, Ranger," she said tautly. "It won't do for us to be seen talking here. The reason Crag and I rode over this morning wasn't to tell Colonel Bell about a raid he already knew about. It was to see you, to discover if you'd learned anything."

"I told you I was wise to Gill's nighthawking."

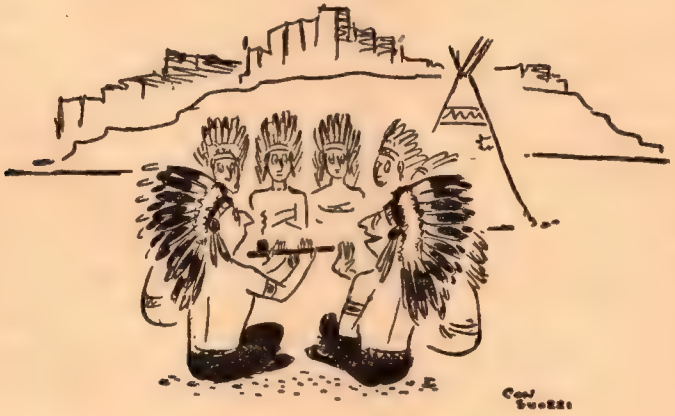
"Anything else? Enough to put Colonel Bell behind bars? That's what I brought you to Black Mesa for."

Hatfield tongued his cheek thoughtfully. "Give me a little more time. I've got the deadwood on Gill. Colonel Bell—I dunno. Gill's just a foreman. He might be double-crossing his boss. We can't go off half-cocked, in case the Colonel is innocent."

Mary's lip curled. "He's Gill's boss. He pulls the strings."

Crag Martinez was heading toward them now, bringing the Rocking R horses. Gill was nowhere in sight.

"You've got to leave the Broken Bell—now!" Mary said. "If your secret's out, you're as good as dead. I'll wait for you down at the bend of the creek. There is so much we've got to talk about. Not the



"No, thanks, I don't smoke"

job you're doing. I've got to know how Reg Dawe met his death." She twisted the diamond ring on her finger. "Well, *hasta la vista!*"

She turned on her heel, took the reins from her foreman's hands and mounted. At once she and Martinez were riding away.

Goldy came up behind Hatfield, nibbling his ear with velvety lips. The Lone Wolf said musingly:

"You damned near got me killed, you ornery crowbait. But Mary's right. We got to be pulling stakes while we can."

CHAPTER VIII

Death at the Creek

IT WAS too risky for Hatfield to return to the bunkhouse for his gear. If Jeff Gill had gone to report to Colonel Bell that their new rider, Jerry Poindexter, was the real Jim Hatfield—then the chances of leaving the Broken Bell alive were slim indeed.

Tossing his saddle aboard Goldy, Hatfield led the stallion to the rear gate of the corral, mounted, and headed at a dead run down the exit road. Let Gill and the Colonel see him making his getaway—that didn't matter now. If it had not been for Mary's providential appearance at the corral a few minutes back, he would already be buzzard bait. Gill had been primed to shoot.

Reaching the bench rim with its far vista of the Black Mesa valley, Hatfield saw no trace of Mary and her foreman, though the sage flats were open, unmarked by barrancas. But the creek looped in close to the bench at this point and Hatfield knew those far coottonwoods were concealing the Rocking R riders. They would be waiting for him.

At the foot of the ledge road, where the flat valley floor began, Hatfield had no difficulty picking up hoofprints showing where Mary and her ramrod had left the road, heading straight for the creek.

Ten minutes later Goldy was wading out on a gravel bar to drink from the creek's sluggish, alkaline current. From the far bank came a hail, and Hatfield saw Mary standing in the shade of a salt cedar thicket, waving to him.

He forded the creek, catching sight of the two horses behind the cedars. Crag Martinez was hunkered down with his back to a tree bole, fanning himself with his hat.

Hatfield grinned as he walked up to the girl. "I took your advice, Mary," he said. "I hightailed out of the Broken Bell while I could, bringing my own horse with me. No need to pretend any longer I'm not Hatfield."

Tears misted the girl's lashes as she led him over into the shade. From this point on the creek bank they had a view of the Broken Bell ranch buildings on the high west bench, and would have ample warning if Jeff Gill organized a man-hunting party to set out after their missing puncher.

"Ranger Hatfield," Mary said huskily, "I know you've got a lot to report—about finding out that Jeff Gill was on that wetback raid last night and so on. But I've got to know how Reg met his death. Crag tells me you were with him when it happened."

Hunkering down on his Coffeyvilles, Hatfield begun to build a cigarette. He was facing the two from the Rocking R so he could keep an eye on Crag Martinez' guns, not trusting him.

He began, "Like the Colonel told you, Dawe and I were sent down to repair the broken fence around that poison waterhole," and went on to give her a detailed account of how Dawe had been bushwhacked while further up the ridge cutting trees for posts.

When he reached that point in his story, he got up and walked over to where Goldy was cropping grass. He pulled the Winchester carbine from the saddle-boot and tossed it down in front of Crag Martinez.

"That's the gun you supplied me when I left Rocking R," he said. "Right?"

Martinez picked up the Winchester, examined it, and nodded. His eyes held a question as he glanced up at Hatfield.

"It is. You'd left your own saddle-gun with your possibles aboard the stage. I couldn't send you out without weapons for long-range work."

Hatfield's eyes burned into Martinez'. "I could have bagged Dawe's killer easy, if I'd had my rifle instead of this one," he said cryptically. "I had him lined up in my sights, at easy range. Twice. Both times that rifle missed fire. Or rather, it didn't fire at all."

Martinez' face stiffened. "That's strange," he said. "This Winchester belonged to Mary's dad. "I've seen him drop a buck deer at a thousand yards with it."

HATFIELD reached in his chaps pocket and drew out a handful of .30-30 cartridges.

"Not with this ammunition, you didn't." He jimmied open a shell and poured the charge into his palm. "Black sand. And the percussion cap's been removed. Why did you fit me out with a magazine loaded with blanks, Crag?"

Martinez came to his feet. Mary said sharply, "What are you saying?"

Hatfield answered grimly, "I'm saying that your foreman tampered with the loads in this long gun. Or somebody did. Knowing full well I'd take it for granted the carbine was in working order. I wouldn't find out I'd been cold-decked until I had to use the Winchester—in which case I'd be in a fight, obviously."

Crag Martinez stared at Mary. "I—I don't know what to say, Mary," he choked. "I loaded the gun, sure, before I got your permission to loan it to Hatfield here."

Mary forced a smile. "I don't know how this happened," she said earnestly. "I do know that my foreman had nothing to do with tampering with your ammunition. It might have come from an old box that Dad had picked up from a peddler some time or other. Defective ammunition from the Army or something. Just don't mistrust Crag."

"At any rate," Hatfield said grimly, "defective shells kept me from getting the killer of your fiancé, Mary. That Mexican made his getaway, then doubled back to pin me down for six, seven hours at the water-hole. Almost made me wonder if he knew my rifle was worthless. Don't seem as if any man would be fool enough to expose himself to easy long-range fire."

Mary knelt down to put her hand on Hatfield's arm.

"Tell me," she said. "Could you identify that—that Mexican if you saw him again?"

Hatfield shrugged. "He was wearing gaucho pants with red satin triangles at the seams. Fancy silver trimmings. Black charro jacket and sombrero with silver braid and ball tassels around. I didn't get a close look at his face."

"What kind of horse was he riding?" Mary asked.

"Buckskin, about fifteen hands high. Fancy Mexican saddle with a dish horn, silver dollars on the martingale."

Crag Martinez grunted, "Description would fit any one of a hundred Mexicans. Whoever it was could have been on that Ocotillo Canyon raid last night."

After a long silence during which each of the three was lost in gloomy thoughts, Hatfield said suddenly, "The important thing is, that Mexican must have known who he was gunning for. Jim Hatfield. Which means that somebody on the Broken Bell must have tipped him off, thinking Reg Dawe was the Ranger. Only two people knew about that. Bell himself and Gill."

Mary spoke then, but her words made no sense at all to Jim Hatfield. Equally puzzling was the venomous hatred that choked her voice as she said to her foreman:

"Remember the San Jacinto festival over in Del Rio last year, Crag? Remember who rode with me in the fancy-dress parade?"

Hatfield saw Crag Martinez' face blanch. The foreman said in amazement:

"Mary! It could be. It could be."

"It fits, Crag. And you know why."

Jim Hatfield grinned stiffly. "You two

might let me in on the riddle, folks. What fits?"

Mary's mouth flattened into a stiff line.

"We just figured out who killed Reg Dawe. And why. It wasn't a Mexican. It was a gringo dressed in fancy Mexican costume. Reg's killer fully intended to let you see him, so you'd go back to the Broken Bell with the report that the bushwhacker was a Mexican."

BEFORE Hatfield could speak, Crag Martinez jumped to his feet, staring off across the creek.

"We got company," the Rocking R foreman rasped.

Hatfield twisted around. A lone horseman was just breaking through the tangle of willowbrake and dwarf cottonwood across the creek. Jeff Gill.

The Lone Wolf's hand dropped to gun butt. "Gill caught us napping," he whispered. "He trailed me here. I should have known he would. He might have drygulched—"

Mary whispered tensely, "Stand hitched, Hatfield! Let Crag and me handle this."

Jeff Gill had spotted them now. He was putting his horse across the shallow water, straight for them. A buckskin cowpony wearing the Broken Bell brand.

No one spoke as the Broken Bell foreman spurred up the mud bank and dismounted. Hatfield noticed that in Gill's holster a staghorn butted Colt revolver replaced the one he had left at the corral, and which now was in Hatfield's saddlebag.

"You doublecrossed me, Mary!" the Broken Bell foreman bit out, his eyes fixed on Jim Hatfield's guns. "You said you'd fix it so this Ranger wouldn't show up on the Broken Bell. You got him off'n that Marfa stage—and then you let him live! I want to know why."

Wild panic went through Hatfield, reading the import of Gill's words. Gill and Mary Romaine were in cahoots!

Hatfield's hands blurred, came up from holsters with sunlight winking on blued gunmetal.

"Reach, Gill!" he snapped, backing away. "You—"

He broke off as he bumped into Crag Martinez, behind him and to his left. Or rather, he bumped into the muzzle of Martinez' sixgun, reamed against his short ribs.

"Drop the artillery, Ranger!" Crag Martinez said quietly. "You're hogtied for branding and don't know it. We only been waiting for Gill to show up."

A dizzy sensation went through Jim Hatfield as he let his sixguns fall into the rubble underfoot. The trap had been sprung with shattering surprise, catching him completely off-guard until the moment Jeff Gill had opened his mouth to speak to Mary.

He turned to look at the girl. No longer was she a thing of beauty, a ranch girl fighting for the survival of her spread. In her eyes was the cold, lethal quality of a killer. A sardonic smile touched her lips as she met Hatfield's accusing stare.

"It's true," she said quietly. "I didn't send to Austin for Ranger help. Colonel Bell did. But I thought I could use you to the Rocking R's advantage. I thought I could make you believe the Broken Bell was working with those wet-backers—and your testimony in court could smash the Colonel so the Rocking R could take over the valley graze. But things didn't work out. The fault is mine."

Hatfield drew in a deep breath. "It looks," he said drily, "as if they worked out the way you intended them to. You've caught me flat-footed."

Mary shook her head. "I made the mistake of changing our plans without getting in touch with Jeff Gill. I told Jeff I'd get you off that stage and put Reg Dawe in your place, to block the Colonel's game."

Hatfield scowled, not getting this. "Isn't that exactly what you did—kidnap me with that 'Remember the Alamo' password? It's easy enough to see how Gill, in the Colonel's confidence, tipped you off to all his plans about me."

Mary Romaine said heavily, "After the boys brought you to the ranch the other

day, this other idea came to me. Have you go to work for the Colonel, knowing Jeff was going to help the wet-backers raid my stock last night. That was to divert suspicion from the Rocking R, to have the Mexicans rustle from us as well as from the Broken Bell. I had visions of you testifying in court on my behalf—"

A TALL TEXAS TALE

A ROLLING STONE

SOME years ago a scientist went into the backwoods country of Texas and hired a half dozen natives to help him in an experiment. They were to dislodge a huge rock poised on a cliff and send it rolling to the bottom. It went bounding down the mountainside with greater momentum than he had figured on, and finally came to rest on the outskirts of town.

The townspeople soon heard about it, and when the scientist and his helpers arrived a great crowd surrounded the heavy rock. The scientific gentleman approached it, removed a large magnifying glass from its case and went over the rock inch by inch.

He finally faced the crowd, put the glass back in its case and remarked in the serious tones of a man who had made a great discovery:

"Nope. No moss."

—*Al Spong*

JEFF GILL muttered profanely, "You sent Hatfield over to our spread without telling me a damn thing about it. We're lucky your grand schemes didn't upset the whole boat, Mary."

When Mary did not answer, Gill lifted a sixgun from holster.

"No use holding up the pay-off any longer," he said. "Crag, I'll thank you to give me the fun of cashing in Hatfield's chips. I caught on that he was a Ranger when that stallion of his made such a fuss over him in the corral this morning. If you hadn't horned in with your big play, Mary, Hatfield would have been buried by now. I would have told the Colonel it was self-defense."

Mary turned away. By that tacit gesture Hatfield knew she had spoken his death sentence.

"Wait!!" Hatfield called out sharply. "I've got something to tell you, Mary. But I won't talk unless Gill pouches that gun."

Gill's Colt muzzle came up, his thumb dogging the hammer back to full cock. As quick as a striking snake, Mary spun about, throwing her own gun on the Broken Bell foreman.

"Let him speak, Gill. I think I know what he's going to say."

Once more under Mary's gun drop, Jeff Gill's face went ashen, but he holstered his gun.

"All right, Hatfield," Mary said quietly. "What was it you wanted me to know?"

Hatfield made a gesture toward the horse Gill had ridden over from the Broken Bell.

"Thought you might be interested to know that that buckskin Gill was forking is the same bronc that Mexican rode when Reg Dawe was murdered."

Jeff Gill made a choking sound and fell back a pace, desperation glazing his eyes.

"That's a damned lie, Mary! He's stalling for time! Trying to get the jump on us!"

Mary stalked forward until she was two paces away from her Broken Bell confederate.

"The Ranger is *not* lying about that buckskin, Gill," she said in a voice freighted with such cold ferocity that the Lone Wolf felt a chill coast down his own spine. "He described the clothes Reg's bushwhacker wore. They were yours, the one's you wore in the fancy-dress parade in Del Rio last San Jacinto Day. *You* killed Reg Dawe, Jeff!"

Gill cringed back, face gelid with sweat. His guilt was too obvious to be hidden. He was a man on trial for his life.

"You're on the right track, Mary," Hatfield prompted. "Gill made me think he was holed up in the barranca south of that arsenic pool. That was to keep me pinned down until dark. But he didn't stick around. He lit a shuck back to the ranch ahead of me, so he could be almighty surprised when I showed up with Reg Dawe's body."

Mary did not appear to have heard. She said to Gill in that same dull, remorseless monotone:

"You've always been in love with me, Jeff. How many times have I refused you? Then I met Reg over in Del Rio two years ago, and knew he was the man for me. You've been insane with jealousy ever since Reg gave me a ring. You bushwhacked Reg to keep him from getting me!"

Jeff Gill made his desperate gamble then. He fell into a gunman's crouch and his draw was too swift for Hatfield's eye to follow, the greased-lightning gun-lift of a trained killer.

But even so, Gill didn't have a chance. Flame lanced from the bore of Mary's gun. At the same instant Crag Martinez' six-shooter blasted behind Hatfield. Two slugs ripped into Jeff Gill's chest. Blood gouted through the punctured shirt.

Crag and the girl fired again and yet again, the impact of those needless bullets spilling a dead man off his feet to send him rolling soddenly, over and over down the shelving bank, to hit the creek with a foaming splash. Blood tinctured the silty water in long pink threads. Gill's spurred boots hammered a brief tattoo in the mud, then the life ran out of him, leaving him limp, one outflung arm visible above the water, as if clutching toward the sky.

MARY ROMAINE blew smoke from the barrel of her gun and thrust it back into leather. Then she turned to face the Ranger.

"Killing Gill won't bring Reg back," she whimpered. "But it evens the score.

Hatfield felt a sickish sensation in his belly. Gill was out of the picture, the man who, in love with Mary Romaine, had been her secret ally, her spy in Colonel Bell's camp. Mary's sudden change of plans in sparing Hatfield's life on the day of their meeting had backfired with tragic consequences, costing her the life of the man she had loved. Now, Hatfield knew, his turn was coming.

"Hatfield," Mary asked suddenly, "did you ever hear of a Texas Ranger named Mike Birdsoll?"

Hatfield nodded, startled at hearing Mary speak Birdsoll's name. Mike Birdsoll had been a Ranger working out of Presidio, not far up the Rio Grande from Black Mesa, up until three years ago. He had vanished without trace.

"I told you my father met his death at the hands of Mexican wet-backers last year," she said. "That wasn't true. It was three years ago, and he was helping the Chihuahuans haze a jag of Colonel Bell's cattle across the river when the law jumped him. Ranger Mike Birdsoll shot my father. He fell in the river and his body was never recovered. But he tallied Birdsoll. Crag Martinez here brought me proof of that. Birdsoll's Ranger badge."

Understanding came to Hatfield then. He knew the truth now about where Reg Dawe's silver-circled Ranger star had come from, the one Colonel Bell had turned over to the coroner, the law emblem which Dawe had used to complete his impostor's role. Birdsoll's star!

"I've hated Texas Rangers ever since," Mary Romaine went on implacably. "Up until now I haven't had a chance to avenge Dad's killing. That's why you're not going to die as easy as Jeff Gill did, Jim Hatfield!"

CHAPTER IX

More Than Texas Rangers

HATFIELD felt his scalp prickle. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Crag Martinez standing by, sixgun aimed

at his torso. Hatfield had seen men die with a slug in their intestines. It meant sure death, a gut-shot. But a slow one. A man could suffer torture for a day or more shot that way.

"Crag," Mary said, "you remember the quicksand *sumidero* where our herd bull got bogged last spring? I think that is the best grave we could pick for this Ranger."

Crag Martinez nodded. "Quicksand," he agreed, "is a good Injun trick. Gives a man a chance to think. Couple hours, maybe. Time to repent his sins, regret he ever pinned on a law badge. I'll take care of it, Mary."

Mary nodded, too. "I'm going back to the ranch," she said. "The Romero Canyon job is going to take all night and this raid I intend to lead myself. It's the blow that will break Colonel Bell for good and all. I don't intend to leave it up to Castro or Gomez. This raid can't fail, Crag. It must not."

Martinez grinned. "As you say boss. You spend the day resting up. I'll lay low over on the west foothills, keep an eye on where Bell has his waddies working cattle. See you a couple hours after sundown at the entrance to the Romero. Okay?"

Jim Hatfield took his chance then, knowing time was fast running out on him. With Mary and her foreman discussing some kind of plans of their own, the edge might be off Martinez's vigilance for just the necessary instant he could have a chance.

He whirled and plunged at the Rocking R foreman, his shoulder crashing against Martinez' gun arm and slamming the man to the ground. The wind grunted out of his lungs.

Hatfield drove a crashing blow to Martinez' jaw, then got a vise-like grip on the foreman's gun arm. He heard Mary Romaine's scream, the thud of her boots as she charged in.

He was clawing the sixgun from Martinez' hand when Mary's shadow fell across their struggling bodies. He heard the air whistle under the descending gun in her hand.

The muzzle caught Hatfield behind his left ear, but his stetson brim cushioned the blow. Half-stunned, he fought to roll over and lift Martinez' gun to cover the Rocking R owner, but she had danced aside and the sun was in his eyes, blinding him momentarily.

He felt another blow hit him on the head, heard steel thudding hard against bone. Fireworks exploded in his brain and a vast black tidal wave of oblivion swirled about him. A third hammer blow, and blackness engulfed him, left him afloat on a sea of nothingness. . . .

When he rallied it was to find himself on horseback, and the scene had changed so drastically it took him several moments to adjust himself to reality.

He was straddling Goldy, but his hands had been lashed to the saddle-horn and his ankles were roped together under the sorrel's belly with a length of horsehair reata. There was an aching bruise on his chest where his body had lain over the saddle-horn.

As his vision cleared, the Lone Wolf peered around, drawing nearby objects into focus. He was surrounded on all sides by eroded shale walls, claybanks which formed a circular basin some hundred feet in extent.

Dried incrustations of alkali along the bottom of the twenty-foot cliffs indicated that at some some time in the past this had been a boghole of considerable area, almost a lake. Something had cut off the inlet of water and it had dried up, leveling a flat bottom checkered with dried white mud on which the sun laid a blinding sheen.

TWISTING in saddle, he saw a break in the pothole wall behind him, wide enough for a horse to get through. That was how Goldy had entered the place.

Then he saw Crag Martinez.

The Rocking R foreman was out in the middle of the dry lake bed, some fifty feet away, gingerly testing the surface of the ground. Here and there the prints of his boots showed as deep, moisture-glistening depressions in the crystalized mud.

Martinez had apparently left his horse

outside the pothole, and had led Goldy and his unconscious prisoner in here. The roundabout cutbanks shut off all view of the outer terrain.

There was no way for Hatfield to judge how far they had come from the creek where Jeff Gill had met his doom. Judging by the position of the sun, which stood at high noon, Hatfield had been unconscious for at least an hour and a half.

As memory returned, he realized that this boghole was a vast quicksand deposit, Mary had said something about a Rocking R herd bull getting caught here, probably seeking water, so he must be somewhere on the east side of the valley.

He could not keep his eyes open for any length of time. The pitiless glare of the sun on saline crust was blinding. Not until he heard the *crunch-crunch* of Martinez' spike-heeled cowboots approaching across the bog bottom did he look up again.

Martinez was haggard from battling with the heat. His shirt was plastered to his back with perspiration. It was like a bake oven here in the circle of low shale walls, with the thermometer probably crowding a hundred and twenty-five and no shade whatever to temper the stove-like radiation.

"Crag—" when Jim Hatfield spoke, the effort renewed the intolerable ache in his skull, "can't Mary have her revenge against the Texas Rangers without dragging it out? Can't you put a slug in me and dump me into that *sumidero?*"

Martinez halted alongside Goldy's stirrup and began working on the knots which bound the Ranger's left foot to stirrup.

"The great Jim Hatfield begging for mercy?" jeered the puncher. "Caving in at the payoff?"

"I pulled a man out of a quicksand bog once," Hatfield said quietly. "Buzzards had cleaned his skull. Ants were finishing up what was left. It's not cowardice, son. A quick bullet. . . . Who's to be the wiser?"

The Rocking R foreman laughed sadistically. "Boss' orders, Ranger. Got to carry 'em out to the letter."

Martinez had Hatfield's left leg freed of the rope now. He was crossing around in front of Goldy, who was fidgeting nervously, sure proof to Hatfield that the footing was none too secure even at this point.

Martinez was playing it cagey, not untying his victim's hands first.

"I wonder," Hatfield said musingly as the foreman loosened his other foot, "how well you and Mary Romaine will sleep nights after this job. Dumping a man into a *sumidero.* The Comanches seldom stooped to that kind of torture, Crag."

Martinez drew a bowie knife from a belt scabbard and made quick work of severing the knots which bound the Ranger's wrists to the saddle-horn. Hatfield had started to massage his throbbing flesh when Martinez seized him by one elbow and hauled him brutally from saddle, letting him drop on head and shoulders.

Then working with the speed and skill of a puncher hogtying a yearling calf, Martinez picked up the hair rope and knotted his prisoner's legs together at knee and ankle.

"Bog's pretty well dried up," the man panted. "But I've found a spot over by that blow-sand patch that's soft enough. You might hit bedrock a dozen feet down."

LYING on his back, Hatfield stared up at his captor.

"Mind answering a few questions?"

Martinez grinned. "Seeing as how you'll be talking with the devil this time tomorrow, why not? You can holler your lungs out and nobody'll come to investigate, Ranger. This hole is a good ten miles from the Broken Bell."

"Meaning my closest friends would be from the Colonel's ranch, is that it? And this time yesterday I was all set to report to Mary that I had the goods on the old man."

Martinez said, "Mary's old man had his heart set on controlling all the valley range. Only Colonel Bell stood in his way, That's why Romaine joined up with those Mex rustlers, couple-three years back. Steal Broken Bell to the edge of bank-

ruptcy, then buy the Colonel out."

"But a Texas Ranger put a stop to that?"

"Put a halt to Old Man Romaine's dreams, yes, but Mary's carried on right well. A year from now we'll be living over at the Broken Bell. This Black Mesa country will be Rocking R from muzzle to butt. That was her pa's dream. It takes more'n Texas Rangers to lick Mary, Hatfield."

Martinez was using his bowie knife to cut rawhide saddle strings from the skirts of Goldy's kak. His purpose soon became evident. Jerking Hatfield's arms in front of him, Martinez bound them securely at the elbows, knotting each thong over and over again.

"Leave your hands loose, so's you can swat at the buzzards," Martinez chuckled. "Reckon it's about time to start the band playing, Hatfield. But you said you wanted to ask some questions?"

Hatfield said wearily, "I'd like to know if you tampered with the cartridges in that Winchester you furnished me."

Martinez sheathed his knife and hunkered down to get a grip on his prisoner, preparatory to hoisting him over one shoulder.

"Mary did that. She was afraid you might set out after Jeff Gill last night, according to plan, and she didn't want to run any risks of having you shoot one of your own hombres."

"How many men on the Rocking R's payroll are in the Broken Bell's bunkshack?" Hatfield asked.

Grunting with effort, Martinez lifted his bound prisoner over one shoulder and set off along the rim of the dry lake.

"You're the great Ranger, the manhunter—suppose you tell me," Martinez challenged. "That's what Mary sent you over to Bell's ranch to find out."

"I know of at least four, counting Gill."

Martinez laughed. "You score a hundred per cent, Ranger. Four it is. Gill,

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"In this picture you have to kiss the girl . . . do you think you can do it?"

---

the Brubaker twins, and Slim Connelson. Mary's using 'em for the last time tonight. Gill assigned 'em to be tonight's guard over the Colonel's bedground in Romero Canyon. All of the Broken Bell's chips are in one pot, and Mary's boys are the only guards."

The burly foreman paused to recover his wind. Hatfield's hundred and eighty pounds made a heavy burden.

"By tomorrow night, Bell's herd will be grazing down in Mexico. And the Broken Bell will really be broke." Martinez chuckled at his pun. "Yessir, bankrupt complete. And then the Rocking R will take over. The money Mary's made from selling beef in Mexico is going to buy Bell paper from the Black Mesa bank. It's that simple."

The crisis that had caused Colonel Bell to break down and appeal for Texas Ranger help was at hand. Tonight's raid would mean ruin for the old Texan.

Goldy was plodding along behind them as Martinez resumed walking, heading for an area of dry blow sand which had sifted over the rim, powdering the edge of the dry lake bed. There was a slick smoothness to that sand which told its grim story to Jim Hatfield. Under that film of blow-sand lurked the deadly, bottomless quickmire which Martinez had selected as a Texas Ranger's grave.

HEARING Goldy's soft whickering, Hatfield felt a stab of emotion. He wondered sickly if Mary Romaine would slap her Rocking R iron on his magnificent sorrel, or whether she would not dare have in her remuda an animal which might some day be recognized as the personal mount of a missing Ranger.

At the edge of the blow-sand patch, Martinez suddenly stepped forward. With a mighty shove of his iron-muscled arms and shoulders, he hurled Jim Hatfield bodily away from him.

The Lone Wolf felt the thin over-crust break as he landed on hip and elbow. In a blind, reflexive threshing movement he righted himself, only to feel his rope-bound legs plunge knee-deep in wet, sucking mire.

He heard Martinez's taunting laughter as the foreman backed away to more solid ground. In his violent efforts to extricate his legs, Hatfield only succeeded in speeding his rate of descent into the shifting black quicksands. By the time he had stopped struggling he was buried to the crotch.

Martinez reached to pick up Goldy's trailing reins.

"Prime bronc you got here, Ranger!" he called. "If Mary okays the deal, this horse is going to top my string. *Adios!*"

Cold moisture rimed Hatfield's pores. He clamped his mouth tight to keep from breaking down and begging Crag Martinez for a merciful bullet. But he would not, could not give the man the satisfaction of hearing him scream for mercy!

CHAPTER X

The Slow Death

JIM HATFIELD had lost his stetson at the moment of being hurled into the *sumidero*. The sun beat down on the nape of his neck, searing the flesh. Sunstroke might snuff out his life before the quicksand had time to rise over his mouth and nostrils.

Darkness swirled giddily around him, induced by the pain of his gun-whipped head. When his vision cleared, he found himself alone in the quicksand basin. Martinez had led Goldy out through the exit.

Hatfield tried to keep his mind blank. But it was impossible not to dwell on what the coming hours held in store.

The Mexicans called this quicksand trap *el muerto tardio*—the slow death. Hatfield faced that now, without hope of extricating himself from the gluelike sands. He had already sunk midway up the hip line.

He knew that when the quicksand encased his lungs, it would be nearly im-

possible to breath. A man couldn't expand his ribs against the roundabout vise-like pressure of quicksand. Each successive breath became shorter and shorter. Maybe a man would smother instead of strangle.

His thoughts wandered crazily. For a time he imagined he was talking to Deputy Marshal Lane up in the Wells-Fargo barn in Pecos. The scene shifted to the parlor of the Rocking R ranch house and he was remembering the strange stab of disappointment when he realized that beautiful Mary Romaine wore an engagement ring. Reg Dawe's ring.

Bluebottle flies buzzed around his face. A *zopilote* buzzard swooped down over the basin and came to roost on a shale knob directly above the *sumidero,* clacking its beak obscenely, like a gourmet anticipating a feast by licking his chops.

He had no way of telling the passage of time. It seemed that he had been here an eternity since Crag Martinez had left the basin, but he knew less than an hour had elapsed.

He bent his body forward, having the use of his arms from the elbows down, but his clawing fingers scooped powder-dry sand, digging into the suction of the wetness below without offering any leverage to pull himself out. The quagmire was inching up over his gun-belts now.

Even if by some miracle his boots reached solid bottom, that would only prolong his death. No human being could endure many hours of this torturing heat.

The sun westered beyond the rim of the pothole, an infinity of time later, bringing some respite from the heat. Another buzzard joined the first. They seemed to be quarreling over which would make the first strike. One of them made a fluttering pass at Hatfield, but his flailing forearms drove the bird of prey back to its perch. Buzzards rarely attacked living prey.

Then he saw the ant. A single red ant, crawling along the blow-sand toward him, antennae waving experimentally.

Sheer terror went through Jim Hatfield, as if the tiny insect were a prehistoric monster coming to devour him. That ant was the forerunner of thousands of ants to come. He remembered what the ants had done to that half-breed he had found in a mud wallow over in the Panhandle a few years back.

He blew the advancing ant away, and felt an overpowering relief. He was tempted to struggle, even knowing that any movement of his body would speed his sinking. The quicksand's level had risen now to his short ribs. Another hour and the stifling pressure on his lungs would begin to make itself felt.

Maybe, he thought, Mary Romaine would relent about meting out this unthinkable death on a human being, and send Martinez or one of her ranch hands over to the sink hole to dispatch him with a bullet.

THEN, remembering the cold ferocity with which she had shot down Jeff Gill over at the bend of the creek this morning, he knew better. Mary was a fiend incarnate, for all her sexy loveliness.

An overpowering drowsiness came to the trapped lawman. His head tilted forward and the weight of it pressed his rawhide-bound elbows under the crust of the *sumidero.*

He roused himself, shouting in terror, a nameless unmeasurable interval later. The sand had crept halfway up his rib cage now, toward his armpits, and it took all his strength to jerk his submerged elbows free of the crust.

He was startled to find that the circulation had restored itself to his hands and forearms. By some unaccountable miracle, Martinez's tightly-knotted thongs had loosened.

Then he reasoned it out. The actual quicksand was moist. The water had soaked into the dry rawhide, expanding the leathern strips.

He diverted himself by flexing his arm muscles, working the rawhide thongs further from his elbows. But it came as an anti-climax when the knotted thongs slid

in a loose braclet toward his wrists and he shook himself free of them.

His arms were free now, but what could that benefit him? The nearest solid ground was a good two feet away from his outreaching fingertips.

A column of red ants was advancing across the blow-sand now. They broke formation and retreated in all directions as the Lone Wolf pelted them with scooped-up sand and gobs of quickmire. At least, with his arms free, he could fight off that horror, could escape those stinging mandibles until the encroaching sands brought death's respite.

And then, like a sound in a nightmare, he heard the thud of horse's hooves, echoing inside the pothole walls.

He opened his red-rimmed eyes, stifling a glad cry. Was Mary coming back to reprieve him from her ghoulish death sentence?

Dimly, as if seen through wet glass, Hatfield saw the horse picking its way gingerly along the ledge of solid alluvial earth at the base of the claybank.

Goldy!

His sorrel had somehow broken away from Craig Martinez. The frayed end of a sisal rope dangling from Goldy's bridle told how. The horse had come back to stand a last vigil over its doomed rider.

Goldy whickered an almost human greeting as he neared the *sumidero*. His reins were looped over the pommel, out of reach, but the dangling length of hackamore put a wild new hope in Hatfield's breath.

"Closer, Goldy! That's the boy!"

It might work. The big risk now was in Crag Martinez coming back to rope the runaway sorrel.

Goldy halted directly in front of Hatfield, pawing the uncertain earth nervously, testing the quicksand experimentally and then drawing back. It would not do for the horse to get his forelegs bogged in this hole, or Goldy would be doomed to *el muerto tardio* the same as Hatfield himself.

Hoofs wide-braced on the ledge of solid earth that had eroded down from the cut-bank, Goldy extended his neck over the quicksand bog, trying to reach the trapped Ranger.

Leaning forward as far as possible, Hatfield reached for the dangling trail rope. He made it on the fourth try, desperately wrapping the sisal strands around his wrists.

"Now back up, Goldy. back—*back!*"

The horse who had shared Hatfield's life on the danger trails of Texas during the years he had been a justice rider responded to the familiar command.

INSTINCTIVELY dreading the deadly sands, trembling with nervousness, Goldy braced his haunches and pulled back against the dragging weight on the trail rope, swiveling his hind quarters away when his rump touched the shale cliff.

"Easy! Keep pulling, old boy!"

The pressure of the tugging rope seemed to be ripping Hatfield's arms from their sockets. But imperceptibly, he could feel his bound legs lifting against the intolerable suction of the *sumidero's* depths.

If Goldy's shifting hooves and tremendous weight did not crumble the solid earth away, if the rope didn't slip from his chafed and bleeding wrists, there was a chance.

Hatfield was powerless to aid the horse through any effort of his own. It was like pulling a stubborn cork from a bottle. If the rope broke . . . He prayed desperately that the rope would stand up under Goldy's unceasing backward pull.

The end came suddenly, with a gurgling sucking sound as if the *sumidero* were a living enemy crying out in frustration at losing a victim.

Goldy stumbled backward as Hatfield's thighs and knees and booted legs suddenly jerked free of the pinioning mire. Hatfield felt his face being dragged along the blow-sand, his nose bumping hard against the ledge of solid ground.

"Whoa, Goldy! Whoa, boy—"

Hatfield shook his bleeding wrists free of the trail rope. Summoning his last ounce of strength he crawled away from

the quicksand, clawing with his fingers in the crumbling shale deposits, dragging his helpless legs to safety.

He lay there on solid ground for many minutes, listening to the tom-tomming of his overtaxed heart in his ears, drawing in deep, deep breaths.

Goldy was snuffing at his neck, rubbing his back with a soft muzzle. After awhile, Hatfield rolled over and sat up. The spot where he had been sinking in the *sumidero* was smoothed over now, giving no trace of the horrors it concealed. Anyone—Mary Romaine, for instance—visiting this scene would assume that Hatfield had sunk from sight forever under those innocent-looking sands.

With trembling fingers Hatfield clawed at the knotted hair rope with which Martinez had trussed his legs. The task was impossible with his bare hands so he reached for Goldy's stirrup and hitched himself erect, bidding the sorrel stand steady while he fumbled with the straps of his *alforja* bags.

From one of them he found a stock knife and slashed his rope bounds. There was a loaded Colt Peacemaker in the cantle pouch, the gun Jeff Gill had dropped in the dust of the Broken Bell cavvy corral this morning—was it only this morning? To Hatfield's dazed brain, that episode was something that had happened to someone else, a hundred years ago.

He slipped the catch of the .45 and twirled the cylinder. A vast relief flowed through him now. Let Crag Martinez ride through that break in the basin wall. He would catch a bullet in the head if he showed himself.

Hatfield tarried to tug off his boots and shake them free of clinging quicksand. He recovered his flat-crowned stetson.

Then, looping Goldy's reins over his wrists, he led the sorrel along the narrow ledge of firm ground, gun palmed, ready for any emergency he might face.

"I'm in your debt, Goldy," he choked. "Reckon I'll always be in your debt."

He reached the narrow defile which formed the only exit from the quicksand sink and led the stallion through it for fifty yards. Then the claybanks fell away and he found himself staring into the sunset glow. Below him a tawny, sage-dotted slope fell away for miles toward Black Mesa valley and the bright glitter of the creek which spilled into the Rio Grande.

DIRECTLY west was the big blue-shadowed maw of a major canyon snaking into the western range, which he knew was the Romero. Back in that gorge was the holding ground for Colonel Bell's cattle, bunched there as protection against the Mexican wet-backers who had driven Texas cattle off their valley graze.

Tonight that herd would be guarded by Slim Connelson and the Brubaker twins, Martinez had said. The traitors from the Rocking R who were on the Colonel's pay-roll. Traitors planted there by Jeff Gill, waiting to betray the man who paid their wages by turning Broken Bell beef over to Mary Romaine's Rocking R riders and a crew of Mexican wet-backers who were probably north of the Rio Grande at this very moment.

Hatfield climbed into saddle with an effort. Hunger tortured his belly. His every bone and sinew ached from the ordeal of the quicksand bog.

He reined Goldy toward the north, keeping his gun ready in case Crag Martinez or some other Rocking R rider surprised him. He could see the faint outlines of Colonel Bell's ranch on the bench a thousand feet above the main floor of the valley. Even further north he could see the glint of sundown glow on the windows marking Black Mesa town.

It would take some tall talking to convince Colonel Bell that everything he owned was at stake tonight. With a mere handful of cowpunchers to back him, the Colonel might hesitate to ride for Romero Canyon to engage Mary Romaine and her Mexican *compadres* in bloody range war. And there would be no time to ride on to Black Mesa in the hope of enlisting the help of the sheriff and a posse.

Well, it was his job, his responsibility as a Texas Ranger, in the last analysis. He would tackle the Romero Canyon

renegades single-handed if the Colonel forced him to it. That's why he was in this lost corner of the Lone Star State in the first place—to put his guns against the enemy in the climactic battle of a wetback war that had raged too long, far too long.

CHAPTER XI

Romero Canyon Showdown

WITH full darkness enfolding Black Mesa Valley, Mary Romaine rode away from her Rocking R headquarters with Joe Wherry and three other veterans of her father's gunslinger crew bracketing her stirrups. This was the supreme night of the girl's life, the culmination of the relentless undercover war she and her father before her had waged against the Broken Bell for the unchallenged mastery of Black Mesa valley's cattleland.

The Rocking R cavalcade rode in complete silence, exchanging no talk, knowing they had to cross the valley in secrecy.

Over on the west side they could see the glow of lights marking Colonel Bell's ranch. This final climactic death-stroke at the Broken Bell had been masterfully planned. With Jeff Gill's cooperation, they had nothing to fear from Broken Bell guns when they reached Romero Canyon.

Tomorrow, the Brubaker twins and Slim Connelson would show up at the ranch, haggard and frantic, with the report that they had lost the herd to overwhelming Mexican forces. By that time Mary and her riders would be back at the Rocking R, the cattle safe in Mexico.

Colonel Bell would pay off the three traitors without suspecting the role they had played in the rustling raid that had broken him. He would see nothing wrong in the Brubakers and Connelson hiring on with Mary Romaine's outfit some weeks later.

Riding through the night, Mary tried to visualize what the immediate future held. Her only regrets were that her father and Reg Dawe had not been spared to share in her victory.

Gaining possession of Broken Bell range and assets would be a routine matter of picking up the Colonel's debts at the Stockman's Bank in Black Mesa. Maybe the Colonel would ride over to the Rocking R and try to make some kind of a deal, to try to salvage what he could of his blasted fortunes. And Mary would laugh in his face.

They splashed across the creek, heading in a direct line for Romero Canyon. Once, briefly, Mary's thoughts touched on the Texas Ranger, Jim Hatfield, but she felt no regrets. She was sure that by now the flat sands of a quicksand *sumidero* high on her hilly range would hide forever the whereabouts of the most celebrated star-toter in the Lone Star State.

Personally, she had no malice toward Hatfield, respecting his courage and admiring his handsome virility, as any woman might admire an outstanding specimen of manhood. But a lifetime of hatred for established law, engendered in her formative years by a gray old range wolf of a father, had so warped Mary Romaine's sense of values that Hatfield's death meant but one thing—a measure of vengeance against the Texas Rangers, who had cut the Old Man down short of his appointed time.

A rider hailed them from the black maw of Romero Canyon. Mary and her riders reined up as Crag Martinez spurred out of the night, a formless blur against the black background of the mountain wall.

"Everything's going slick as goose grease, Mary," her foreman reported. "Castro and Gomez and twenty-odd vaqueros are swapping small talk with Bell's guards. Connelson tells me Colonel Bell's wondering why Jeff Gill turned up missing, but otherwise the old man don't suspect nothing out of the ordinary tonight."

Mary asked quietly, "Hatfield?"

Martinez laughed gutturally. "Chucked him in that boghole around two-thirty

this afternoon. Quicksand's cheated the buzzards by now."

Mary said callously, "I'll ride by the *sumidero* on my way home tomorrow to make sure . . . Did you shoot his horse?"

Martinez sighed. "I shot that golden beauty like you said, Boss. But I sure hated to. Still think we should of let Castro take him down into Mexico."

IF THERE was a note of uneasiness in Martinez' voice when he neglected to mention that Goldy had broken his trail rope and dodged Martinez's following rifle fire this afternoon, Mary apparently did not notice it.

Martinez thought, I got to ride circle until I locate that bronc. Mary would have my scalp if she knew that sorrel was still drifting loose.

"Bueno," Mary said. "Follow me, boys."

The riders strung out in single file behind the girl as she led the way between Romero Canyon's frowning, unseen walls.

Rounding a bend in the canyon, the incoming riders saw the glimmer of a campfire up ahead. A half-mile beyond that the canyon widened out, forming a two-thousand-acre holding ground, where Colonel Bell's herd was being held for safekeeping against wetback raids.

Sombreroed, gun-hung Mexican renegades were grouped around the campfire, sipping coffee. Slim Connelson, the Broken Bell rider in charge of the three-man guard crew tonight, came to his feet as Mary Romaine reined up inside the circle of guttering red fire glow.

"All set, ma'am," Connelson reported.

She nodded, and began speaking in Spanish.

"Bueno. You will douse the fire, Slim, so as not to booger the herd on the way out of the canyon. Castro, you will wait with your vaqueros until the herd passes this spot. Have men posted to keep them from heading north."

"Si, señorita," acknowledged the serape-clad *jefe* of the Chihuahuan party. "Broken Bell cattle, they are as good as across the *rio, es seguro.*"

Mary went on, "The moon will rise in half an hour. That will make the drive south easy enough. Keep the herd on the west side of the creek all the way. You've got the rest of the night to make the crossing. It should be easy."

Muttering voices of the men crowding about agreed.

"Martinez and I will ride upcanyon and circle the herd." Mary was speaking as crisply as a field general giving orders at the start of a military operation. "Moonrise will be our signal to stampede the herd out of bedground. It will be our responsibility to keep the cattle moving. The rest of you know what to do."

One of the Brubaker brothers tossed a bucket of water on the fire. In the ensuing darkness, redolent with the blended odors of steam and hot ashes, Mary Romaine and Crag Martinez spurred away from the camp, bound upcanyon.

Fifteen minutes' steady riding brought them to the widening mouth of the holding ground. Under the stars, the Broken Bell cattle herd, numbering more than a thousand head of prime Texas shorthorns, formed a mottled clotting on the grassy floor of the canyon.

The riders circled the sleeping herd, keeping to the north cliffs, girdling the jumbled talus there. Mary was thinking, six months from now this will be mine. Rocking R will move off the desert half of the valley onto this cattle heaven of the Colonel's. Just as Dad would have done thirty years ago if the Colonel hadn't beaten him to it.

The herd was behind them now and Mary and her foreman swung around to face the bedground.

Down the narrow slot of the canyon they could see the eastern skyline across the valley glowing pearl-bright before the promise of the rising moon over the range.

THE moon, a day from being full, lifted its silvery rim over the coal-black peaks to eastward. Martinez was fidgeting in the saddle, fingering his Colt butt, waiting for the signal to start firing and stam-

pede the herd on its one-way trip to Chihuahua.

"Hold it till the moon's five minutes high, Crag," Mary said, as the argentine light spread up the canyon, painting the fluted rock walls in vivid relief, clearly showing them the sleek cattle bedded down on the grass below.

The clink of a spur chain somewhere on the rocky slope behind them made both man and girl stiffen in saddle and wheel their horses. No one was supposed to be in this canyon behind them. The main ridge trail from Colonel Bell's ranch entered Romero Canyon from this upper end. Was it possible the doughty old stockman had decided to increase the size of his night guard?

Mary and Grag Martinez, guns palmed, scanned the moon-gilded slope and saw nothing, heard nothing.

"I thought I heard something, Crag." In Mary's voice was a note of suspense.

"You did." Martinez said gruffly. "If anybody's squatting behind them rocks up there we're sitting pigeons."

Steely silence held for a space of a dozen heart-beats. And then, from a cactus-shadowed rock ledge in the near foreground came the unmistakable double click of a sixshooter being cocked.

"Just stand hitched, Mary—Crag!" a voice spoke softly from the ocotillo clump. "You're bull's eyes against the moon. Throw down the guns."

Martinez caved first, hoisting his arms and letting his drawn gun clatter to the rocks.

"It's Jim Hatfield, Mary!" he panted. "Or his ghost. I'd know that voice anywhere!"

For a moment, Mary remained rigid in saddle. Then the voice of the Lone Wolf reached her, gently, persistently:

"I wouldn't want to gun down a woman, Mary. Even a she-devil such as I know you to be. Don't force my hand."

Mary tossed her gun aside and raised her arms. Her face was chalk-white as she saw the tall, rangy figure of Jim Hatfield move away from the ocotillos, followed by his golden sorrel, the sorrel Martinez was supposed to have destroyed this afternoon.

"I don't want to have any shooting, to start a stampede," the Ranger said. As he stalked forward, full moonlight flashed on the circle-enclosed law badge pinned to his shirt. "Colonel Bell and his men are planted at the mouth of the canyon, bôth sides. I'll see to it that the Brubakers and Connelson don't lead your Mexican *compañeros* out of the canyon this direction. They're trapped, Mary, the whole shebang!"

Mary's bosom lifted and fell. She turned to stare at her foreman alongside her stirrups.

"This is your doings, Crag. When I wanted Hatfield put out of the way I should have done it myself. How much of a bribe did he pay you at the quicksand bog?"

Crag Martinez was staring at Hatfield like a man bereft of his reason. Suddenly the strain became too great to be endured. In full defiance of the sixguns jutting from the Lone Wolf's fists, Martinez dug for the gun in his left-hand holster.

Hatfield waited until the moonlight flashed on up-darting steel. Then with cold precision he tripped gunhammers. His slugs struck Martinez' chest and forehead, dumping him bodily from stirrups.

A WILD, inhuman scream left Mary Romaine's lips then, as she seized her reins and raked her blue roan gelding's flanks with her Spanish spurs.

Martinez' horse, shying away from the dead man at its side, momentarily blocked Jim Hatfield's view of the girl as she sent her horse hammering up the slope, veering toward the rimrock which led back to Black Mesa valley.

For a moment, Hatfield had his gunsights on Mary's back, but he held his fire. Even if she got away, he could not bring himself to shoot a woman. Even the woman who had engineered this brutal wet-back war against Colonel Bell.

He flashed one last glance at Crag Martinez, lying on his back, his sightless

eyes reflecting the moon's glow. Then he vaulted astride Goldy and swung the big stallion around in the direction in which Mary Romaine had fled.

He saw her, bent low over her saddle, reach the rim of the cliffs and head back toward the valley. She was quitting the Rocking R forever, taking a gamble on reaching the sanctuary of Mexico. Undoubtedly she had many friends in the lawless Chihuahua villages.

Goldy swept up the same trail, rapidly gaining on Mary's mount. Below, the bedground was a scene of wild confusion. The crash of his gunshots had started the cattle stampeding down the canyon.

Above the thunder of Goldy's hooves, a shifting wind brought to the Ranger's ears a clatter of muted gunfire. Mary's Mexican rustler crew had been caught in Colonel Bell's cross-fire, down there at the mouth of the canyon!

Mary's white sombrero swept from her head as she twisted in saddle to see Hatfield bearing down on her, reaching for his coiled rope. The Ranger intended to capture her alive!

She emptied her gun at the lawman thundering along behind her, but her shots missed by a wide margin. Then, in the extremity of her panic, she flung the useless weapon aside and reined her galloping horse sharply off the trail.

A shout escaped Jim Hatfield's lips as he saw the blue roan's hooves skid on the brink of the cliffs, but it was too late. Mary Romaine, choosing her own way to escape arrest, was spurring the pony forward. Toward a chasm's edge!

ANOTHER instant, and horse and rider vanished over the sheer rock ledge. Choking back a horrified gasp, Jim Hatfield pulled Goldy to a halt and leaped from stirrups. He peered down into the shadowy, awesome depths of Romero Canyon. Moonlight outlined the plummeting figure of horse and girl an instant before they crashed into the broken talus three hundred feet below.

Downcanyon, the rumble of horns and hoofs was dying out as the Broken Bell herd fanned out into the valley, onto graze which would be theirs from now on, safe from the threat of wet-backer raids from south of the Rio Grande.

He wondered briefly how many of the Mexican rustlers and Rocking R riders had been crumpled to death in that tidal-wave of beef cattle, flooding the narrow mouth of the canyon from rim to rim. Along about now, he reflected, Colonel Bell and his loyal riders would be checking their haul.

Jim Hatfield reached for Goldy's reins.

"Well, that's it, Goldy," the Lone Wolf murmured. "All that's left is to check the tally of dead rustlers with the Colonel and ride out with what prisoners survive. I reckon the next time we see Black Mesa Valley it'll be stocked with one brand instead of two. Broken Bell."

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The bird call came again, and his whole body tensed.

The Silver Watch

By JAMES McKIMMEY, JR.

RICK YOUNG walked with Joe Curt into Al Hallery's saloon, watching Joe carefully, of course, because he liked to learn all that he could. When they reached the bar, he slapped his hand down on the wood almost simultaneously with Joe.

"Whisky, Al," Joe said.

"Whisky," Rick said, and then held one hand flat against his gun-belt, the other

The killer who stalked him through the dark woods had taught him all he knew—which now seemed pitifully little

limp against the top of the bar. Just like Joe.

Hallery placed a bottle and two glasses in front of them. "Early for you boys."

"We're going to have a long day," Joe said.

Joe was lean, flat-stomached, flat-hipped, and he wore his gun and badge as though he had been born wearing them. His face was angular because of high cheek-bones, and the look in his cold blue eyes along with the curve of his eyebrows gave him a faintly surprised look.

You were taken with that look the first time you saw Joe Curt. But after awhile, you got used to it, because you learned that the look was deceiving, that Joe Curt seemed never to be surprised at all.

"Riding somewhere?" Hallery asked.

"Might be," Joe said, downing his second drink.

"Might be," Rick said, and downed his second.

Rick was not quite as tall as Joe, but just as hard and well-muscled. Most of the difference in looks was in their faces. Rick disliked his own fresh-scrubbed appearance, and even though he realized that a nineteen-year-old face hardly had a chance to look like Joe's, which was thirty-five years old, he had tried to minimize it once by growing a mustache. He hadn't needed Joe's telling him to shave it off to know that it had looked pretty foolish.

"Might be you got them stage robbings in mind?" Hallery asked. "Got a hunch maybe?"

"Al," Joe said slowly, "you're full of talk this morning, ain't you?"

Hallery motioned apologetically. "Just interested in Red Cliff's sheriff and his deputy."

Joe lifted a round silver watch from his vest pocket and looked at it. Rick started to take out his own watch, but stopped in time. He hadn't let Joe know he'd sent away for an exact duplicate of Joe's watch. Now and then Joe seemed to notice how much Rick took him for a pattern, and while Rick didn't mind this too much, the watch was a little different.

RICK knew, without being told, that some time, somewhere, that watch of Joe's had meant something special to him. The way he treated it was almost as though he had more respect for it than for his gun. It was heavy silver, with a back a quarter of an inch thick. It had heavy, simply designed numbers on its face, and if you squeezed the top, that back flew away and let you see what was inside.

The first time Rick had touched that watch had been one night in the office when Joe was a little drunk. The famliar expression of surprise on Joe's face had changed into a kind of sad and frustrated look that Rick had never seen before—and never had since. When Rick had opened the back of that watch and looked at that picture of a girl, then he'd been almost certain, foolish as it seemed later, that maybe Joe's eyes had been kind of wet and shiny.

Rick had looked long and hard at the picture, examining the careless tilt of the girl's head, the dark hair and eyes, the full mouth. And even though the picture had aged a little in its niche, Rick still had thought he could feel some of the spark and devil that was in that girl's eyes.

He'd looked up at Joe, surprised. Joe never paid any particular attention to women in Red Cliff. Somehow Rick had always associated Joe with living, breathing, thinking the job of the sheriff, with nothing else in mind.

"Who is she, Joe?" he'd asked.

Joe had looked at him for a long time, weaving a little in his chair, and finally he'd said, "Rick, son, don't ever get yourself tied into no woman's web. You can't get loose if you do, and you just go on being caught like a spider keeps catch of a fly."

Rick had looked back at the picture. "If you're trying to compare this here girl with some spider, Joe, I think maybe you've done enough drinking for the evening."

"Spider and a web, son," Joe said, and Rick had thought he'd heard a half-sob in Joe's throat. "You can't get loose, no mat-

ter how long you try, no matter what you do. And do you know what a woman spins her web out of, son? Gold."

"Ain't what I thought they spun 'em out of," Rick had said.

"Gold," Joe had repeated. "Gold and more gold, and you get it for 'em so's they can spin the web tighter."

"You ain't making much sense."

Joe had shaken his head sadly. "That's because you never been caught in no web."

"Well," Rick had said, looking at the picture, "any old time this here spider wants to spin her web around me, why—"

It had happened so fast then that Rick hadn't even had time to try to move out of the way. Joe's fist had caught him square on the jaw. Rick had tumbled halfway across the room, and when he'd gotten back to his feet, Joe had been slumped over the table, his head buried in his arms.

Rick had walked out without saying a word. He had been mad for a good long while that night, but finally had cooled down and tried to think about it sensibly. He shouldn't have been so smart, saying what he had about the girl, and when he'd thought about it real hard, he'd realized how much that girl, whoever she was, meant to Joe. And maybe, Rick had thought, that explained a lot of things.

There was a kind of reckless desperation in the way Joe Curt did things, as though he were being fed by some fire deep inside that wouldn't let him rest. Maybe, Rick had reasoned, the girl was responsible for that fire, and maybe that was why Joe kept doing things the way that he did—taking unnecessary chances. Like the time he'd walked straight into the bank, knowing that that kill-crazy Ned Heiger was in there with his gun.

JOE could have waited Heiger out, only he'd walked straight in, right into Heiger's gunfire, taking two slugs in the arm and side, but putting a hole right through Heiger's stomach. Dan Brady had said afterward, "This here sheriff of ours plumb don't know fear," and everybody had agreed.

But as time had gone on and more things like that kept happening, Rick had began to realize that maybe Joe lacked fear because he really didn't care, somehow, what happened to him. It wasn't any deliberate effort on Joe's part to kill himself, Rick was sure. Just that he didn't care if the odds were about ninety-nine to one against him.

Rick hadn't been able to figure it out, could only kind of feel how it was, but something inside kept telling him that girl was responsible for the way Joe Curt was. And, all of a sudden, that made Joe a dozen times more mysterious and heroic in Rick's eyes, than ever. It made Rick want to have a girl just like Joe's in his own memory. That was when he'd sent for the watch. He didn't have a picture, of course, to put in it. But he'd tried for one once.

At about the time all that trouble about stage robberies had started, Rick had ridden on one Valley City run as a guard—his own idea he'd talked Joe into letting him try. There hadn't been any trouble on that run, and when Rick found himself in Valley City with the night to kill, he'd wandered in and out of the saloons. In one place he'd found a little dark girl who, if you sort of closed your eyes and looked at her just right, looked a little like the girl whose picture was inside Joe's watch.

Rick spent all the money he owned on the dark girl that night and felt sure he was getting to understand what Joe had said about the gold part. But when he'd run out of money and the girl got mean, even called him dirty names before she left him, Rick had had a lot of trouble figuring out how any man would get caught in a web spun by a woman like that. About the only thing he got out of it was a big headache, and an empty money-belt. Why would a man keep going back to that?

It was the difference in women, he figured, and decided to be patient until he could find one really like the one whose picture Joe carried.

Only so far, right up to this minute when Joe was getting out his watch and looking at the time, Rick hadn't found one. The only girl he had was that Mary Henderson who wasn't dark or mysterious, but just an ordinary girl who didn't seem to give a hang one way or another how much money a feller had. And she sure couldn't spin any webs, unless you counted kind of lying awake nights, seeing her face and such. Rick was certain a woman's web wasn't anything like that.

"Well," Joe said, looking at Rick, "reckon we ought to be riding?"

Rick straightened casually. "I reckon."

"*Adios,* Al," Joe said.

"*Adios,* Al" Rick said.

As they were riding to the outskirts of Red Cliff, "The way I figure it, Joe, is if they hold up that stage today, they're going to do it just beyond the Yellow Creek where the gorge cuts through."

"Is that where you'd do if if you was them?" Joe asked.

"That's where I'd do it," Rick said positively.

"Well," Joe said, "let's see if you're right."

They rode silently, as usual, moving the horses along at a good, steady pace. Rick felt the morning sun hot against his face as he watched the distant bluish outline of the mountains. There was a faint tautness in the pit of his stomach, because Joe was taking his advice, sure enough, about heading toward the gorge by Yellow Creek. Rick let his mind drift to the possibilities of what he and Joe might run onto.

THESE robberies had been going on for better than a year now, and each had been done viciously by some lobo outlaw without an ounce of decency in his system. Each time a robbery occurred the driver, guard, and every passenger on the stage had been killed in cold blood.

The company had added more and more guards, and kept information about the heavy-value shipments secret. But invariably they were outwitted. The heaviest gold shipments were always the target, and no witness ever survived.

Rick had taken a personal interest that had become almost a mania concerning these robberies, and each time he had berated himself for not having figured better about where to be and when. Time after time, he'd settled it in his head where a robbery would most likely occur; only each time Joe had disagreed.

Yet at the same time Joe had always said that he would give anybody the benefit of doubt, and whenever he'd sent Rick out by himself to the particular spot Rick had chosen, it had resulted in failure.

This time Rick had argued that the robberies followed a pattern. The first, he pointed out, had occurred before Red Cliff, the second beyond, the third before, the fourth beyond. "It's wherever I ain't," he'd told Joe with an embarrassed grin.

"Don't be ashamed, son," Joe had said. "I ain't had any luck either."

"Well, this time I got it figured out. It's going to be between Valley City and Red Cliff. I'm sure of that. There ain't any sense of our splitting this time. It's a pattern, that's what it is; and we can throw down on them pretty as you please if we head toward Yellow Creek."

"Maybe," Joe had said, looking at him. "Maybe you're right."

Now, for the first time where the holdup was concerned, they were riding out together, and that tautness stayed deep in Rick's stomach because he had a feeling that he'd figured it right this time.

The sun reached the middle of the sky and was moving down toward the horizon by the time they reached Yellow Creek. They had skirted the deep cut through the rocks, and ridden upward to arrive at a point on a plateau above the north end of the gorge.

"You see, Rick said, "them boys could wait right down there on the edge of that shale. Sweet as honey they could put the drop on that stage, send one man down to lift the shipment, and it'd all be as smooth as anything."

"Stage folks likely got that figured out," Joe said.

"They haven't figured things out too

good before," Rick said.

"We'll see," Joe said. He took out his watch again. "They'll be coming through in about twenty minutes."

They waited silently. Joe, Rick noticed, seemed to be staring straight into the distance without really seeing anything. When the stage finally appeared in the distance, Rick tensed. But there was not a movement anywhere below. When the stage had almost reached the gorge, he slumped dejectedly in his saddle.

"Wrong again, looks like," Joe said.

Rick nodded reluctantly.

"Well," Joe said, "let's go down and greet them stage boys, long as we've come this far."

They caught the stage just as it reached the other end of the gorge. Joe waved to the driver, and the stage rumbled to a stop.

The driver grinned. "Hello, there, boys."

Rick had started to return the greeting when suddenly he saw Joe's right hand darting toward his holster. Surprised, Rick turned, but Joe's gun was already out and pointing—straight at Rick himself!

Rick's eyes widened and he blinked, but Joe's face was a mask. His blue eyes were steely hard, and his mouth was an ugly line.

"Joe—" Rick began.

BUT Joe's gun was already exploding, and Rick felt himself pitching from saddle. He struck the ground hard, and lay there, dazed, feeling pain in his chest. His sight was blurred, and only vaguely he heard Joe's gun blast. When the driver slid off his box and thudded against the stubby short grass, Rick looked at the sprawled figure with detached surprise.

Again and again, Joe's gun barked. But Rick couldn't move. All he could do was keep thinking that it had been *Joe*. And that accounted for everything.

This time, Joe's hand had been forced. He'd known that Rick had figured out the pattern of the holdups, each time happening where Rick wasn't, and he'd known that before long Rick would figure out the rest of it. So coldly, without a flicker of those eyes, Joe had—

Rick felt the sickness of realization crawl through him, then forced himself to move a hand slowly to his chest, searching for the wetness. There was none. With surprise, he looked at the hole burned through his vest. He moved his fingers, exploring, and then it came to him.

He felt the silver watch in an upper pocket. It was broken and bent, but it had deflected the bullet so that Rick had been only stunned by the impact, not wounded.

Still partially dazed, he looked again at the sprawled figure of the driver. Then he realized that the shooting had stopped.

Hooves were pounding along the gorge, and Rick wrenched himself to his knees, swaying. He ran a hand hard across his mouth, glancing at the stage. It stood there silent and ghostly, and Rick knew no life was inside it. Then he turned his eyes to the gorge. Joe was riding swiftly, getting away. Rick suddenly reached for his gun.

The old worship for Joe was gone all at once, and replaced by a swift, terrible hate. Rick's whole body trembled as the blur of Joe's movement appeared in the sights of his gun. He tried to keep his hand steady, but even though he knew he had to make his shot count, his aim was wild when he fired.

Joe's horse reared as Joe brought it to a sudden turn, and Rick fired again. His second shot was wilder than the first. Joe rode to one side, firing back, and gained the protection of a rock formation near the middle of the gorge.

Rick's palm suddenly felt wet, and he had to regrip the gun to keep it in his hand. He wriggled on his stomach to the front wheels of the coach, and as he moved he realized it wasn't all fear that was racing through him. It was knowing that Joe was a blood-stained killer who had to be destroyed, no matter how!

He also knew that against Joe's gun he wouldn't stand a chance. Joe was deadly with his weapons, and Rick had been

with him as deputy long enough to know his own deficiencies in comparison. Joe had taught him a lot, but not enough to make him as good in a gunfight as he would have to be to win against Joe Curt.

Rick glanced quickly behind him. His horse was just beyond the stage horses, and already Joe was shooting for the animals. Rick rolled away from the wheels of the stage, just as the four-horse stage team bolted. Rick leaped for his own chestnut, kicking the animal into a sudden gallop as he hit the saddle. He rode straight along the bottom of the rise that ascended to the plateau where he and Joe had waited for the stage.

He would have to get away! He was the only one in the world who could identify Joe as the robber and killer. And Joe was not intending to let him do that. If Rick couldn't get away and Joe claimed that the stage bandits got his deputy, nobody would be wiser. And the robbing and killing would go on.

Another bullet screamed near Rick's head. Joe was riding hard after him now. The stage was weaving crazily and suddenly Rick struck off to the right to cut in just behind it. He had to get to Red Cliff, and speed was his only chance. But even as he moved across the brush-spotted ground, he realized that it was not going to work that way.

JOE'S horse, a well-trained buckskin that Joe had raised from a colt, was faster on a flat stretch than Rick's chestnut. Rick wouldn't get more than a mile or two before Joe caught up with him.

Rick rode hard for the rise that rimmed the flatland. He sent his horse scrambling up the slope, and reached the flat plateau.

One of Joe's bullets whistled by him as he rode down a small gully, then up again toward the beginning of the foothills of the mountain beyond. It was slower, but once he reached the top of the rise, he could try to get protective vegetation between himself and Joe. His horse stumbled wildly down the opposite side of the slope. Then he rode for the hills.

He was moving in almost the opposite direction from Red Cliff now, but Joe would drive hard on the smoother side of the slope, trying to cut down distance before he climbed the ridge. Maybe, Rick thought, he could double the distance between them.

But when he looked up, there was Joe, riding up on the ridge almost even with him!

Frantically, as a bullet cut leaves beside him, Rick swung off to head up the next slope. The trouble was that Joe could guess everything Rick might do, because Rick had learned everything he knew from Joe.

It became a grim, desperate struggle. Fatigue grabbed Rick's arms and shoulders and legs. His horse began tiring badly under him, and there were terrible periods when he was forced to stop and rest both his horse and himself, when he tried to whip his brain into telling him what to do next.

And all the time, behind him, came Joe—steady, deadly, never dropping too far back, always close enough that if Rick made an error, it would be his last.

When darkness began edging around him, Rick rode down a short bank and into the shallow water of Yellow Creek, then pushed his horse downstream.

When he could no longer see, he stopped and limply sat on his saddle. He had made almost a complete circle, but in spite of all that effort he knew that Joe was still within hearing distance of him. He stopped breathing to listen, heard a familiar sound just once more, then nothing but the sounds of the night.

The absence of the sound of Joe's raspy breathing turned into a pressure that pounded at Ricky's ears. He twisted around suddenly, searching the heavy blackness. His own breathing was loud in his ears. He wanted to leap to the ground and start running. But he forced hmself to remain silent and motionless, teeth tight set, trying to think.

Joe could figure every turn, every motion. He knew Rick's horse, knew how far the animal could go, under what con-

ditions. He knew that right now Rick couldn't travel much further without rest, and somewhere back there he was figuring out how he could best finish Rick off.

Rick wiped a trembling hand across his eyes, and ducked his head at the sound of a twig cracking nearby. Joe had figured he was at the end of his endurance! Now he would dismount and move quietly ahead to pick Rick right out of the saddle.

Another sound exploded from the blackness, and Rick ducked again. He waited, every muscle taut, listening, but there was no further sound. He held his face close to his horse's sweating hide, catching his breath in short gasps.

He was sure Joe was out there now, afoot, crawling closer. And he closed his eyes because he couldn't see anyway, waiting for a bullet to rip into him. No use in running any more. It had to end some time.

ODDLY then, he found himself relaxing, as though the realization that he could no longer escape had loosened the tautness of his muscles and eased the killing tiredness that had spread through him. And all the time he kept waiting, waiting, for a whirling piece of lead to cut into him, he was remembering how much he had admired Joe, how he had looked up to the sheriff.

Time seemed to stop and hang motionless, and Rick's brain settled into a pleasant, relaxed part of him that waited patiently along with his arms and his legs and his heart. A coyote howled somewhere in the distance, and the water kept trickling below. He heard a night bird now, too, a sweet-calling bird, whose warble drifted clear and bright from downstream. It was soothing to Rick's ears, almost making him wish for the bullet to strike suddenly and painlessly.

Then suddenly Rick opened his eyes wide when the bird call came again, his whole body tensed. It was a peculiar, familiar sound, repeated again and again.

His brain spun and sifted through a thousand memories—and all at once it came to him.

He swung around, listening from the opposite direction, and heard Joe's horse pounding through the shallow water. For a half second longer he remained frozen in his saddle thinking, Joe knows all of my tricks, but I know all of Joe's!

Then, soundless, he came out of saddle and leaped toward the edge of the bank. He dipped a hand into the cold water, closed his fingers around a handful of pebbles.

Joe's horse was nearing now, galloping straight ahead, and Rick kept remembering how often he'd seen Joe do this. First the whistle, low and inconspicuous, then the buckskin running straight to him.

And now Rick knew! Joe *had* dismounted and crawled ahead, moving far enough beyond where he estimated Rick to be, so that he could come back to the creek well ahead of him. Now he was signaling his horse, planning to panic Rick straight into his waiting gun, at the same time making sure that Rick didn't bolt in the wrong direction.

The buckskin had almost reached Rick now, and suddenly he threw the handful of pebbles at the rump of his own horse. The chestnut leaped forward, galloping straight downstream.

Half-crouched, Rick ran quietly along the bank. A dozen yards ahead, he halted and knelt, searching the darkness. His chestnut was still bounding forward, the buskskin close behind.

Then—the blaze of a gun, and the wild scream of Rick's horse being hit! But Rick's own gun was firing straight at that give-away blaze, as he emptied it into the night.

When his gun was empty, Rick felt weak-kneed. He listened to the heart-tearing sound of his wounded horse, heard Joe's buckskin galloping downstream. Then that sound faded out, and there were only the sounds of the night.

With hands that seemed apart from him, Rick reloaded and carefully started moving downstream. Shapes were dim in front of his eyes, but finally he saw the outline of his fallen horse. And just be-

(Concluded on page 113)

ICE-TRAP IN THE ARCTIC!

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Tom Allard well knew that the pen was mightier than the sword, but when the sword was a sixgun, it would take more than . . .

PAPER BULLETS

By FRED GROVE

THE whoop cut distinctly across the wind slapping the frame building. Horses drummed up from the log bridge over the river and sound seemed to roll along the hard-packed street. Tom Allard became thoughtful at his desk. He caught the eye of Harry Babb, standing in stoop-shouldered competence before the type cases.

"Visitors," murmured Tom, with a rueful grin. He glanced at his watch and stood up.

Babb had the cynical expression of a man who had observed much of mankind in fifty-odd years and retained not a single illusion. Despite that, a flicker of interest broke through his habitual indifference now. His voice came muffled from around the tattered shreds of his dead cigar, while his thin, sensitive hand kept traveling without pause between case and composing stick.

"Wonder how long old Art Swan can hold the lid on?"

"A good question." Tom stopped by the door, thinking that Harry Babb lived a lonesome life. "Have some fun tonight, Harry."

"At my age a bottle is no longer fun—it's medicine." Babb seemed to back off from the subject, as he did from anything that broached sentiment. He switched his attention to the make-up tables. "Ads running light."

Tom nodded wearily. For both had read the same set of tracks and divined where they were leading in a town that was slowly dying. He had his hand on the door knob when he heard boots strike the plank walk. Then the handle turned roughly and Tom stepped back, seeing Frank Vane fill the doorway.

"Come in," Tom invited uneasily.

Vane did not bother to close the door. He circled a look of distaste around the crowded print shop, and his broad nose appeared to draw in against the smell of ink and paper. The judging eyes were bright with anger which he could not contain.

He held a newspaper; he slapped it for emphasis. "Still ranting about cowmen coming across the river to trade!"

"I've no complaints against cowmen," Tom answered evenly, "and it says so. But riff-raff's another thing. Tinhorn gamblers. Thieves and murderers from the states. Gun sharks like the Cimarron Kid. Hide out in Indian Territory and come over here to raise their hell. And

they're hurting us. We've acquired a gun town's name on this side and you know it. Oklahoma Territory knows it." He indicated newspapers on his desk. "You ought to read the exchanges."

VANE was unimpressed. "Sure, the boys have their fun. But Riverton's sliding downhill—remember that. I figure these riders just about keep it going. Why rile 'em? If you ask me, they're doing us merchants a favor."

Vane holstered no guns. As if he disdained them. He was in his middle thirties and he wore his dark conservative suit and white shirt and pearl-gray hat as a uniform of respectability. As if, Tom thought, he had some secret need for it.

Pride and ambition shone in Vane's alert, bold eyes. He was not an extra large man, but he could create the impression of bulk and formidable power. He also could take 'most any side of an issue, Tom had discovered, and by some puzzling alchemy of character make it sound right and good for all.

"Depends." A quiet caution touched Tom. Was he getting careful, like the others? "I know this—homesteaders are taking their trade to Pawnee City. Some have even quit this part of the country, moved on west. They want a town free of shootings. Where their women folk and kids can come and a horse won't crowd them off the walks." Vane lifted a hand, but Tom went on, conscious that his voice was climbing, "Another thing. Art Swan needs help. One marshal isn't enough."

"I see no reason why we should start a war," breathed Vane in his superior manner. "Swan's doing all right. Riverton will settle down in its own way. What do you expect? It's no skimmed-milk town. No sleepy Eastern village. Thank God, we'll never be like your lukewarm Kansas towns!"

He was at once self-righteous. As if by some special insight he had detected a common danger and must denounce it. He batted the newspaper again.

"I can see you're bent on causing trouble. But I'll hog-tie you." His eyes became unbelievably cold. "Be careful what you print. No more of this."

"Get out," Tom said softly, with disgust. The pressure kicked his stomach and as Vane shouldered out, amusedly taking his time, a quick certainty flashed upon him: He means it. And yet Tom felt no great surprise. Actually, it was a relief to know.

Babb's matter-of-fact voice rubbed across the room. "The frontier brings out all the good or bad in a man. Always the bad. Vane, there, was raised on sour cream."

"Harry—" Tom faced him, alive to a cold fact—"you know what's coming. You don't have to stay."

Babb stared back a moment, bony features expressionless. Then something like hurt changed the pale, ravaged face.

He said gruffly, "Better make your rounds," unable to cover up a moistness in his eyes, which was strange for him. He blinked and bent to his type-setting. As Tom started through the door, Babb called after him, "You should see Sharon Larned more. There's a fine young woman. Vane's been calling on her, I understand."

Stepping outside, Tom entered a copper world of late morning sunlight. He hesitated on the walk, thinking of Sharon Larned and momentarily held by a view that never tired him. The river's silver ribbon winding past the rough-hewn bridge and the wooded bluffs, into the mystery of space and land a thousand years fallow. Rounded hills bulging green with promise.

But when he faced the sun-blasted street, his brief exultation died. Horses were ranked before the Longhorn, Vane's place. Otherwise, the street threw back a mocking emptiness. A bad sign, he thought, a growing sign.

He moved slowly in long-legged steps, a thrust of weary discouragement nagging him. He had the sensation of battling a rising wind, and the wind pressing stronger and stronger, until at last he could no longer stand.

He placed another glance on the high-fronted buildings, and a sick regret gripped him. For he'd seen Riverton that hopeful day in April. Land-opening day. Hardly more than a year ago. Swaggering beneath its dirty tent folds. Everywhere men with the dreaming look of far country in searching eyes.

AND, like a whispering vision, many of them had found it where the land bent westward into promising prairie and gentle hills, and others thought they had discovered it in the stripling town they'd begun by the river crossing. Except that Riverton had become a one-man town—Frank Vane's town.

That knowledge deeply aroused Tom, made him think of the settlement's secret

workings, of men grown afraid. He shook off the feeling and waved at the bent shape of Jim Browerton in his saddle and harness shop; at Samuel McGregor, quaintly immaculate, in his dry goods store. Tom went up the street to Adam Harlow's place of business, "Genl. Mdse. & Groceries," and found Harlow staring moodily out the front window.

"Art Swan been around?" Tom asked.

"Was earlier." Harlow's tone lacked interest.

But Tom persisted. "Think we might talk the council into hiring a couple of extra deputies for Art?"

Unease grew in Harlow's round face, a hesitancy, and he stared down. "Tom," he answered in the quietest of voices, "I read your paper. Don't push too fast."

It hurt to see Harlow avoiding his gaze. This man like a stranger. Not the Adam Harlow of those earlier days. Hawking dollar pies in a ringing voice over a cottonwood plank counter supported by two empty whisky barrels. Helping lay the town. Eager as any man, then.

"We're losing our town," Tom insisted.

"I—" A beginning protest edged into Harlow's voice. His chin tilted up. For a moment he was different. Then the brown eyes turned tired and careful and his shoulders rose and fell.

"At least we could organize vigilantes," Tom ventured hopefully. "Police the town with Art. Vane won't like it, of course, and you and I know why. Things other folks don't know about."

He stifled the impulse to mention Vane's threat. If he did, Harlow might judge that to be a personal reason for Tom's insistence.

There was a silent struggle going on inside Harlow. A reluctance.

"I'm not as young as I was once. Things have changed. You know about Vane's ambition, his mania for respectability. He'll run for the legislature before long. You know his sensitive spot—his past. It's also his great weakness, if people knew. For that reason he'll allow no man to cloud his name, regardless. Remember the risk—to yourself."

He turned indecisively to a counter, his step stiff and heavy. Although just past middle age, he looked far older, and beaten down.

A sudden compassion filled Tom. As he stood there, a keen knife of comprehension cut across his consciousness. He had waited too long. If Adam balked, so would the others.

Harlow swung around. He forced his eyes to meet Tom's. His face had a grayish cast. Something in his tenseness said he had reached a reluctant decision.

"Tom," he began, and unwillingness slacked sickly across his features. "I hate to say this, but I have no choice. Take out my ad."

Stunned, Tom stared with disbelief. Finally, he found his voice. "All right, Adam. But—"

Harlow said nothing more and Tom, suddenly understanding, did not press for an answer. He could spare Adam that self-humbling. After all, it was there for Tom to see without asking. There in the ashamed, stricken eyes. Harlow abruptly stepped away, not seeming to know what to do with his hands. Tom knew immediately that he was thinking of those lost, earlier days.

In silence, Tom walked out of the store, thinking of Vane and how fast he'd moved since the paper had come out yesterday. How Vane, while ruining one man, permitted another to survive only after crushing his spirit. Breaking a man to halter, like a wild horse.

Trembling with anger, Tom moved on. He could see the shape of things and somehow he knew how it would be. So he experienced no surprise when McGregor, a man in his sixties and much too genteel for the frontier, told him:

"That is how it is, Tom. I am too old to fight back. And don't blame Adam. Pity him. Pity us all, because not one of us is truly his own man."

JIM BROWERTON was a cripple, scrawny of build and drawn of face. One foot dragged when he walked and the knobby hump on his back gave him a

look of perpetual pain. For all that, his courage had not withered.

"The Cimarron Kid himself brought me the word from Vane early this morning," he told Tom. "Not exactly an order, y'understand. Just a hint, he said, but I knew better. I didn't say a word. Guess I was too scared. Then he looked around with them dead-pan eyes of his and says, 'You got a nice stock here. You sure have, Jim. Good harness. Hand-tooled boots and saddles. Reckon you'd have a devil of a time fishing 'em out of the river.' He went out laughing." Browerton's eyes blazed. "That gunslinger! He can't tell me what to do!"

Tom eyed the little man, admiring his courage. It was one light in a dark day. "Don't be a fool, Jim. If he comes back, tell him you decided not to run your ad this week."

Browerton's mouth dropped. "I don't get it. How you think you'll get along without business? Better go ahead and run my ad."

"Thanks, Jim. But one fence at a time. For right now, tell him you've canceled."

"Wel-ll—if you say so." Browerton seemed relieved, and also bewildered. "You're up to something?" he asked curiously.

Tom had no answer. On the walk he could feel the wind steadily rising, and he knew that he must push against it or fall. Much like a long traveler, seeing a landmark peak jutting out of shimmering plains, he glimpsed where he was heading. The realization carried him up and down the street to the remaining stores, knowing each stop fruitless before he made it. Vane had been thorough.

Later, pausing in front of the Pioneer Hotel, he noticed men bulked before the Longhorn. Down the street a rider dallied. Thinking of Art Swan, Tom angled into the street.

Halfway across he heard a whistle from the Longhorn crowd. It meant nothing until it shrieked again. Suddenly its insistent shrillness, its timing, struck him as peculiar. Like a signal. At the same moment, from the corner of his vision, he saw the rider spur his horse forward.

Some instinct warned Tom. He wheeled, all his senses hackling. The horseman was galloping straight at him. Tom glimpsed the blur of a dark, mirthless face. He did not realize that he was running, but he was, his long legs springing him toward the boardwalk. It loomed ahead and he jumped. And just before he landed, he felt the violent, air-whipped passage of the horse behind him, heard the rider's flung-back yell:

"Jayhawker, look out!"

Anger burned in Tom. He flung himself around, expecting to find the rider waiting for him. Instead, the man was pounding off down the street, out of town. Without looking back. Tom worked his glance on the crowd. No one spoke. Yet every face told him that they knew the attempted rundown had been deliberate.

Boots sounded at the Longhorn's entrance, and Art Swan came out. He was tall and angular and walked with a cowman's choppy gait, a slow-moving man long past his physical prime, with the belt and holster lying so heavily against his lean thigh they seemed too large a burden for him. His thorny hands appeared cast in a mold of stiffness. Straw-colored mustaches drooped above a tired mouth.

Swan scouted his gaze around, muttering, "What's this?"

A man said in mock concern, "Somebody tried to run the editor down. 'Pears Jayhawkers ain't liked around here."

"Know the rider, Kid?"

"Never saw him before." The face of the Cimarron Kid was both young and old, both cool and unpredictable. He teetered on his boot heels with a wild-running insolence. From within him leaped an inviting malice which he pushed straight at Swan. "Any more questions, Uncle?"

Swan's shoulders rolled doggedly, wearily. "Reckon not. Just figured you might of recognized him."

SWAN took a step, only to check up as the Kid spoke flatly, clipping out the baiting words:

"You calling me a liar?" The Kid

stiffened and crouched a little, and Tom read the obvious challenge. Concern for Swan stirred him.

He heard himself calling, "Hold on! Nobody's hurt."

Swan had already turned. "Look," he said patiently, "you'll pick no fight with me. Go inside—have yourself a drink. Cool off."

The Cimarron Kid stood rooted, faintly puzzled. A look that told Tom he had expected Swan to draw and was disappointed because he had not. There was this old bone between them. Tom knew, and it would never be buried until one shot the other.

The Cimarron Kid said in his flat, dry-wind voice, "Don't crowd me. I'm telling you, Uncle." With a shrug, he strolled inside and the entire crowd followed.

Swan's old eyes trailed them. "There was a day—" His low, passionate muttering broke, choked off in the terrible yearning for the vanished years, for the lost keenness of eye and the speed of hand.

He had been quite calm while he talked the Kid down. Now, Tom saw the loose skin quiver along the gray-stubbled jaw, saw the drawn hands like knotted rope. In that moment, Tom greatly admired the man—and greatly pitied him. Swan had courage, but that was about all he had left. That and an outward cool nerve which came from playing the risky game these many years.

"Watch him, Art."

"My job to."

Tom lowered his voice. "You could use some help. Anybody in mind? Some good names we could bring up before the council?"

"No man I know is a big enough fool." Swan was skeptical. "How would you get it past the council, with Vane running things? He wants a wide-open town." Gratefulness built up in the over-tired eyes. "Here you are trying to help me, when somebody in this bunch just tried to cripple you. I would advise you to carry a gun."

"You have no one in mind, then?"

"Not a soul."

Tom recognized the doggedness again. He hesitated. "What would you say if private citizens got behind you?"

"Vigilantes?"

"Yes."

Swan half-groaned. "You want to blow this town sky high?" Protest lay darkly in his eyes. A dread of the future. His uncertain gaze wandered to the river and back. He said wearily, "I have my rounds to make."

He drifted away and all at once, sharply, Tom felt the day's heat weighing upon him, and a sudden shock of loneliness. It was, he sensed, the same loneliness that walked with Art Swan. He was startled to find himself wondering which way to turn.

The knowledge bothered him as he returned to the print shop. It still persisted early that evening as he entered the Pioneer Hotel. There was in him now the desire to see Sharon Larned, to sit in her parlor and feel the contentment ease over him.

"Miss Larned in?" he asked the clerk, who nodded down the hall.

When Tom rapped at the parlor door, it opened quickly and he wondered if she'd been expecting him. She drew back and said, "So they didn't hurt you?"

He walked in, aware of the blue and rose-colored wallpaper, of the neatness of this room and the peace of mind it gave to him. Already some of his depression had lifted.

"Did you expect them to?"

"I expect them to try to kill you. That was no accident—a man almost riding you down in daylight."

"Word gets around."

"It does—that kind. Next time they'll use a gun."

Her nearness always affected him, and it did now. He caught himself considering her intently. At first glance she seemed a plain young woman, except that she wasn't plain at all. He guessed it was her neatness.

Her cheek-bones rose high and rounded and there was a substance to her tallness and her lips were full. She had inherited

the hotel after her uncle's death and had come out from Missouri a few months back to manage it surprisingly well.

Her face showed a trace of disapproval now. "I wish you'd be careful, Tom."

"That's it. We've all been too careful. Too long."

"I wouldn't say that. You're shooting paper bullets in a pretty serious game."

Irritation caught him. First Adam, now Sharon, tellling him to go easy. He was studying her again, not quite understanding her. Sometimes she surprised him with her perception. It was that of a woman older than her years. It puzzled him, made him wonder.

"Enough paper bullets," he said, "can awaken public opinion. That's the one thing Vane really fears. He's playing both sides and some day he'll get caught in between. You weren't here when Riverton was started. Different, then. People saw something. It's still here if we can find it again." He hadn't realized it until now, but his tone sounded bitter and he was putting it badly.

Her gray eyes, widely appraising him, mirrored a sharpening concern. She drew her dark head back, made a small gesture with her hands.

"Tom—you are troubled!"

He shrugged, thinking, Am I that easy to read, and said, "Nothing to worry about."

"No—nothing," she mocked him. "I heard about the ads, too."

He had been sitting on the divan. He stood up, shaking his head. "Adam is under pressure from Vane, and who isn't? He had no choice. I can't blame him."

She regarded him with open surprise. "You can still say that, knowing what it means, that it will ruin you?"

Her eyes were larger than he'd ever noticed before. She stood very close and suddenly tiny tremors raced through him. There was a tight string of feeling reaching out from her to him. He moved as though in a hazy, high-singing world. His arms went around her. He held her roughly. He kissed her and, for a moment, he forgot anything existed but the two of them.

"Tom, what am I going to do with you? I wish you'd stay here awhile. Till dark. I wish you'd think this over before you—"

He stepped back abruptly, gripped by a stab of suspicion. Unfair, he told himself, and unfounded. Yet Frank Vane also called here. Was she . . . He swore silently at the thought, and still he said, "You want me to quit? That's it?"

"I want you to think of yourself."

Of a sudden all the wonderful closeness between them had gone. He sensed it, and he saw the same shocked awareness in her eyes. He took his hat and walked to the door. There he paused, and even as he spoke he knew that he was being unreasonable.

"You mean that would suit Vane better?"

Sharon colored. "I didn't say that. You know—"

He said stonily, "I think I know what you mean."

He let himself out into the hall, dismally damning himself, hearing her voice behind him as something he'd lost forever," Tom! What are you going to do?"

He kept going. But when he reached the end of the hall, he glanced back. She stood at the door, and he could see her eyes upon him and he had the instant knowledge that there was a hurt there which he could never erase. She did not call to him again, and he turned his back. As he left the hotel, the old violent storm of feeling came shouting around his ears, and he saw clearly the peak of his destination in the distant reaches of his mind's eye. It seemed much nearer this time.

He went outside. He must have gone on a dozen steps before he noticed the blanket of silence over Main Street. The emptiness. It struck him as unusual for this time of evening, and with the Longhorn's tie racks jammed with horses. He stopped, gazing curiously, and vaguely disturbed. Then, pinpointing his gaze, he made out faces peering from the Longhorn's smoky windows, other faces peeking downstreet over the bat-wing doors.

Tom's glance followed their stares and he saw two men. [*Turn to page 70*]

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BOOTS planted wide on the planks, the Cimarron Kid stood confidently. He stood in that queer, stiffened crouch of his, and a few steps away Art Swan faced him. He looked old and gray and cornered, both thorny hands carefully at his flanks.

Tom heard the Cimarron Kid sing out, "I told you, Uncle, I told you!"

Swan's answer came as an indistinct mutter of protest.

"You're yeller!" The Cimarron Kid bit off the challenging words. He spat them at the older man.

"You—" Swan became doggedly erect, in strain. He appeared to summon all his faculties for one supreme effort, for the swiftness he no longer possessed.

It was over in a moment. In one terrible, helpless moment. Before Tom could move or cry out. Swan's knotted right hand jerked. So slow, raced Tom's mind. So agonizingly slow and futile.

The Cimarron Kid's right shoulder dropped a notch. His hand whipped to his holster. Tom heard the ear-blasting report, and saw Swan recoil from the bullet. He did not go down for a second or two. He seemed to sway tenaciously, as an old tree would when uprooted by a violent wind, and then he fell. He still held his pistol. He had not thumbed off a single shot.

A cloud of dirty gray smoke was drifting away from the Cimarron Kid's six-shooter. He stared down a moment, then coolly holstered his pistol and, with a shrug, wheeled and strolled into the Longhorn.

Tom was the first across the street, and a glance told him the marshal was dead. In these last moments the tired face appeared to have softened, quietly relaxed in an expression of contented peace which Art Swan had never found on his dusty streets.

A great wave of regret rolled over Tom Allard. His throat thickened; he felt sick. He bent his head, aware that men were coming out of the buildings. Presently, three men picked up Art Swan's body and carried it away.

Tom's sense of helplessness became intolerable. He had, he realized, crossed the haze of distance and reached the foot of the peak. He stood before it now. He detached himself from the milling crowd, walking fast toward the newspaper office. A man caught up and matched his strides. It was Harry Babb, breathing hard. Something in Tom's face must have told Babb, who said finally:

"When do we put out the paper?"

He knew it all along, thought Tom. He said, "Right now." He felt no excitement; just a settled resolve. "Maybe our last paper here. But it's the only weapon we have. I said it before, Harry, and it still stands. You don't have to get mixed up in this."

"Think I'd run out?" retorted Babb, then he was through the door, lighting the coal oil lamps and slipping on his apron.

A growing outrage drove Tom to his desk. He shut the street sounds from his mind. He half-closed his eyes a moment and the clarity of his thinking astounded him. All of Riverton's secret's took on a close, harsh focus. He picked up a pencil and began writing rapidly, his fury, his bitterness spilling out on the paper, burning in his words.

When he had finished the first sheet, he stood and handed it to Babb, who stepped to a type case. In no time at all it seemed that Tom was done, and was waiting as Babb set the last stick. Quickly, Tom inked the type, rolled a proof and held it up in the yellow light. Babb looked over his shoulder as he read:

> The most cold-blooded killing in Riverton's violent history occurred tonight when the Cimarron Kid, long wanted by Texas authorities, shot and murdered Marshal Art Swan on Main Street.
>
> The murder, witnessed by the editor of the *Weekly Freedom Call*, was an act of deliberate provocation by the outlaw. He cursed Swan, and the marshal courageously sought to defend his good name, though it is common knowledge that his hands were all but crippled by rheumatism. Swan had no chance.
>
> Blame for this outrage must be placed where it belongs. The *Freedom Call* editor feels it his duty to inform the public that Frank Vane, Riverton's principal businessman, is a former outlaw and has encouraged the Cimarron Kid and other members of the Wild Bunch to make Riverton their playground. It is the editor's finding that Vane

is still the real leader of these outlaws, while he poses in the guise of a respectable citizen.

Investigation by the editor also reveals that Vane has been active in purchasing homestead lands cheap from fearful settlers desirous of moving away from the vicinity of Riverton's notorious outlaw headquarters. Vane has ruled by fear, and he will continue to do so until vigilant citizens cast him out.

THERE was more to the story, additional details of the gun fight, Swan's record as a peace officer in the Southwest, and Vane's rise in Riverton. Tom read it with moving lips.

As an after-thought, he said, "Let's add this final paragraph." He began dictating slowly as Babb's hand fairly leaped back and forth. " 'This—will be the last issue—of the *Freedom Call.* The editor makes that announcement—because he knows—that Vane's hoodlums will wreck his shop—or kill him—just as the Cimarron Kid murdered Art Swan.' "

They set a black headline and placed the type in the Page-One form, filled in the remaining space with overset and last week's ads and locked the form. While Babb inked and worked the Washington hand-lever press, Tom picked through his desk for a few personal items, suddenly feeling the finality of all this.

He looked through the window. Men stirred restlessly out there, talking in groups.

Tom stood motionless, tight-mouthed. The room grew quiet. The papers were off. He turned and met Babb's stare, catching the concern in the eroded face.

"There's a six-shooter in the bureau in my room," Babb told him.

Tom, going over to the paper stack, nodded in a way that said he knew. He said, "Better go by the alley, Harry. Be sure to leave some copies at the hotel, and avoid the Longhorn. I'll take care of it and the crowd." He hesitated. He felt responsible for Harry Babb. "Don't come back here tonight. And thanks, Harry, thanks."

Babb was fumbling with his papers, and he seemed to take a long time bunching them. He glanced up just once, and hurriedly hid that glance. Then he muttered, "Watch yourself," and went out of the shop, through his room and the rear door.

Tom's attention stayed on the door until Babb's footsteps lost sound. He swung away, sick at heart, not liking the solitary loneness, sweeping his eyes around the shop. Every piece of equipment in this room he had wagon-hauled from Kansas. Regret piled up like bitter gall within him. For here was the end of something. It was, he recognized, like a lot of other fine hopes Riverton once had. This was a vital part of him and it would soon be smashed.

It came to him that he was dallying. He sighed softly, tucked the papers under one arm, blew out the lamps, and left the office. Pointing up the street, bright with lights now, he threw a brief look at the blurred lettering of his paper's name on the window. He moved quickly, conscious that his allotment of time shortly would be running out. He passed out papers to each knot of men he found.

Finally, he stood before the Longhorn's doors. Here a guarded caution made him hesitate. He had the uneasy conviction of being utterly foolish. But even as he lingered, drawing in breath, he knew that he would go in. He pushed through the doors, into the brittle, excited humming of talk which came against him like a dark current.

He stopped, although hardly aware of it. There was a beginning stillness around him and there was a closeby pressure. He swung and saw Frank Vane at a table near the door. Vane loomed solid and square, and Tom did not miss the impression of stored-up malice. Deeper in the broad room beyond Vane stood the Cimarron Kid, elbows hooked indolently over the bar's edge. His men flanked him.

"Want something?" Vane's voice was a falling ax, chopping apart the quietness.

Tom took a long step to the table. He said softly, "Brought your paper," pitched it upon the table, and waited.

CONTEMPT hardened Vane's stare. "All about the shooting, eh?" He ignored the paper and Tom caught the subtle switch at work in the man again, the elusive metamorphosis. "You brought

this on," Vane stated, "by stirring up the boys. You forced poor Art Swan to fight or back down. I told you to watch what you printed. You're through in Riverton."

"I think," Tom told him and his voice sounded overly distinct, "that we're both through. But you will never tell me what I can or cannot say."

He turned and strode straight to the entrance, feeling the hanging silence and the cold fingers kneading his spine. He barged through the slatted doors, only dimly seeing the stage pulling up at the hotel, and kept on going to his stop. Stumbling through the unlighted front office into Harry Babb's room he found the pistol in the top bureau drawer. He locked both back and front doors and posted himself by a corner of the building.

He was stationed there, the pistol heavy in his slack hand, when the Longhorn erupted men. They formed a dark huddle, as if deliberating. Then Tom, pulled back in the sooty shadows, noticed something for which there was no apparent reason. The street was empty. It had been except for the stage, he remembered now, when he had made tracks for the shop. It was only a vagrant thought, however, and quickly broken when the men advanced along the walk. They made hard-angled shapes in the greasy light, the Cimarron Kid swaggering in front.

Tom waited tensely. His body, he discovered, was not fully steady. He waited as a man would who stares in fixed fascination at his destiny marching to meet him. And in that time every muffled sound, every smell, came to him keenly. Spurs chinking. A horse's fluttering snuffle. A soft wind fanning off the prairie, cool to his hot face. His mind spun once to Sharon Larned.

Then the men reached the street's center.

He thumbed the hammer and fired, deliberately placing the shot over their heads. They drew up just a moment, scornfully, but Tom knew they would not stop. He saw flashes of flame from the Cimarron Kid's gun. Bullets chugged into the pine boards at Tom's shoulder. Suddenly shifting, he felt something strike him—something hot as fire. In the remoteness of the street he heard a woman's throat-torn scream.

He was falling. An instinct that went deeper than thought sent him rolling and twisting around, straining to bring up his pistol. He brought it up at the same moment the Cimarron Kid ran across. Tom fired, feeling the recoil kick in his hand, and the confident shape before him appeared to lose footing and fall slackly away.

A light-stabbing blackness swarmed Tom Allard. He was a swimmer struggling in swift water and no bottom under him. Just before he slipped under, an angry shouting registered distantly on his senses and he caught a glimpse of the wedged men swinging down the street. He could not be certain, because the dimness kept growing. But he thought he saw Adam Harlow, and Jim Browerton's crooked shape, and a woman. . . .

He heard murmurs. Far off at first. Like whispers. He found himself staring at a sky. It seemed unreal. Blue and rose-colored. It gave him a vaporous, detached feeling. He stirred. Pain shot up his left side, which he now learned was bandaged, and he closed his eyes against the hot irons embedded there.

"Be still, Tom. A man can't take a forty-five slug and expect to run foot races the same night. But you will, in time."

Harlow's round features broke through the dizziness. Tom's eyes wandered. It gave him a start to find that he was lying on the couch in Sharon's brightly lamped parlor. There was a shuffling behind Harlow, and Tom, looking, found Browerton and Babb and McGregor. And they all seemed different in manner somehow, though he did not know why. His bewilderment grew.

HARLOW was saying, "We were late enough as it was, just as we've been late about many things in Riverton. But as we came down the street, the crowd seemed to pick up like a snowball. And with the Cimarron Kid dead, the wild ones had no heart. Your paper did it, Tom. Coming out right after the Kid killed Art.

Harry here let no grass grow telling us you'd gone to the Longhorn. We hurried fast as we could."

"Don't be so blamed modest, Adam," McGregor cut in gently. "You came to my store this afternoon talking up vigilantes."

"He sure did," Browerton agreed. "Once Adam swung, we all did."

Tom was grateful, and he understood about them. The change in Adam. The change in them all. And he'd been wrong, thinking they would not fight. Why, he hadn't heard this tone of talk since land-run day. He grinned at them. Until a thought made him frown.

"Vane? What about him?"

Harlow took a moment in answering. "We gave Vane his choice—get out, or stay and face the music. He blustered awhile. I'd say two things decided him. The Cimarron Kid was finished, and he didn't like the looks of the crowd. They wanted to rough him up, Tom. Maybe string him up. So he's gone. Took the stage back to Indian Territory." Somewhere a door opened and Harlow, glancing backward, added hastily, "Plenty time later for the details."

Tom Allard was scarcely aware when they left, though he did notice Harry Babb's parting wink. He was listening to a light step crossing the room, feeling a presence. Turning his head, he saw Sharon Larned, holding bandages and a pitcher of water. She put them on a table and bent down. She filled his eyes and the tremors got him again.

She took his hand fiercely. "Tom, you're going to be all right."

He was silent so long, his throat so thick, that anxiety straightened her. Her hand dug deeper into him.

"It isn't that," he managed with effort. "But a man must eat humble bread at times. I will take mine."

Her lips were close to his ear. "Frank Vane never meant anything to me. I knew you had to fight back. Only I was afraid. Guess I didn't reckon with your paper bullets."

He could not speak at the moment. He knew this woman would be continually surprising him with the depths of her love and understanding.

And, just now, he could think only of her crying his name as she ran through the blackness.

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CAVE OF SKULL FACE

A Novelet by STEUART EMERY

Apache ultimatum—trade the lovely white girl for the seven captured soldiers, or the soldiers would come back an ear and an eye at a time

"Behind you!" she screamed, and Quentin whirled

CHAPTER I

Shavetail

HE LIFTED his hand and the dust-caked column of troopers plodding behind him reined down their mounts and relaxed in leather, cursing the heat in tired mutterings. Wiping the alkali off his glasses, he brought them to his eyes, staring along the road for the sign of dust that would mean an oncoming stage from railhead.

Its escort would be headed by a raw-boned second lieutenant with the dew still fresh on his commission and behind his ears, guarding a woman passenger on the danger trail to Fort Brunswick. Long ago the stage should have rolled into the fort, but with Skullface out and marauding, and his smoke signals going up in black skywriting from the Border, anything

could happen.

Perhaps it had already happened. The sweat that coursed Captain John Quentin's sun-dried body under his blue flannel shirt seemed to grow cold. Prompted by sudden unease and trained to respond to instinct in the desert, he had mounted a platoon of troopers and taken them out to meet the stage here at the halfway mark on the old north road at the end of the malpais spine that ran to the edge of Mexico. His face, old and serious for his thirty years, was emotionless as he looked through the glasses, a tall-forked, rugged man in the saddle with his mind and body honed down by war.

"I can't see anything on the road, Sergeant Getty," he said to the weathered noncom sitting his horse beside him. "You want to try the glasses?"

"If you can't see nothing with them young eyes of yours, Captain, I wouldn't do no better with my old ones. No dust in sight, no stage coming. No smoke means old Skullface ain't caught it and burned it—yet . . . Wait a minute. Yaqui, out on the flank, has spotted something."

On the crest of a tawny sand dune south of the road a solitary rider was pacing his horse. He pulled up, staring toward the Border. Then his hand rose, circling over his head in urgent signal.

"The stage, Captain! He's spotted the stage! On the south road. We can't see it from here because of the sand hills."

"The stage on the south road when I ordered Lieutenant Thomas to travel this north road back to the fort, no matter how much longer it takes? The south road that goes through the cut in the malpais? That's a perfect site for an ambush! With Skullface out!"

GETTY spat judiciously between his horse's ears. "The captain is aware that all new lieutenants know everything when they first get out here. Because there's no danger showing they cannot be convinced it is there. And something is wrong, sir, judging by Yaqui's wiggles."

"Column forward!"

Quentin sent his horse for the sand dune and tore up its slope, with his troopers pounding close behind. At the crest he pulled down where all that was left of a once splendidly-proportioned Yaqui Indian chief sat his horse stolidly. This Yaqui knew Skullface, the merciless Apache who had captured him and made him a slave.

A black patch covered the socket where an eye had been gouged out the first time he had escaped and been recaptured. A stump halfway below the elbow was all that remained of his right arm after his second try had failed. On the third try he had won to safety in Fort Brunswick, crawling the last miles on hands and knees to the white men who were Skullface's enemies.

For the last year Yaqui had stayed on at the fort to do what he could in revenge against Skullface against whom he bore an implacable enmity. He had picked up enough English to add to his Spanish, and he hadn't had to be taught scouting. He had learned that from birth.

Yaqui pointed to the south where the faint dust plume trailed across the vista of sand and malpais.

"Young nantan take south road and stage go through malpais."

Quentin whipped his glasses to his eyes and their lenses annihilated the distance. He could make out the tiny shapes of the coach and its mounted escort already passing into the cut.

"Damn that shavetail! Now we'll have to gallop to catch up to him."

"Too late," grunted Yaqui. "Lookum back of malpais. Dust from south."

Quentin swerved his glasses to follow the incredibly far-sighted vision of the Mexican Indian, and a terrible curse broke from him. Clear above the ragged rock spine on the fort side the betraying cloud of dust that had risen high in the baked air was settling down.

"Skullface! Coming into the cut from the west!"

A faint, far popping began and traveled clearly on the still air. The stage and its escort had disappeared in the cut.

"Skullface in already. Catchum stage."

"Ambush!"

Quentin's hand went up, his voice barked in hoarse command. Then he was pelting down off the sand dune, driving iron in a mad race to reach the trapped platoon and the white woman. Skullface never took any chances in ambush; he hit bloodily with the full force of overpowering numbers.

Hot rage pounded through Quentin's fibres as he gave his big chestnut the bit and its hooves spurned sand. Sixteen trained troopers under an experienced officer could stave off Skullface's surprise attack long enough for help to get there.

But Second Lieutenant Walter Thomas wasn't an experienced officer. He was just another enthusiastic shavetail, reckless because of ignorance, and hadn't listened to his superior officer. Now he had probably thrown his platoon away and himself with it. And his sister!

Quentin had told Thomas that Fort Brunswick was no place for a woman. Out here on the desert a woman faded early, her looks vitiated by endless heat and dust. Lieutenant Thomas' sister, however, wouldn't have any looks to be destroyed, he thought. She'd been teaching school during the four years her brother had been at the Point. She would already be a drying-up New England spinster whose life had been composed of teaching the three R's and wiping dirty noses. But a white woman was a white woman to be saved, no matter what the cost.

Ahead of the racing troopers of the column the popping had swelled into heavy firing, and the lighter rattle of Apache rifles far outpaced the heavier reports of Army carbines. Quentin bent forward in saddle as though his motion could increase the speed of his mount. At tearing velocity the column was traveling along the side of the malpais with the cleft only a quarter of a mile away.

QUENTIN swung his arm as the mouth of the cleft loomed, and took his platoon in in a thunder of hooves. Wild battle was raging beyond a bend in the high rock wall. Apache howls mounted over the din of gunfire. Then they were around the bend and plunging into an arena of hell.

The stage stood askew across the road, its horses dead in their traces. Other dead horses lay in front of it for a barricade over which troopers were firing in a welter of black smoke. Here and there blue-clad bodies sprawled.

Not a hundred yards away the road bent again and around the bend screeching with blood lust, poured the charge of Skullface's long-maned riders. From the rimrock above the gut riflefire slashed down and Apache heads and shoulders showed. Quentin yanked his horse down, forefeet pawing air, and the column he led fought their mounts to a standstill behind him.

"Fire from saddle!"

The carbines crashed in steady, trained bursts. The ambushed troopers yelled in relief and their gunfire roared. A sleet of heavy slugs ripped into the center of the Apache charge. Ponies were going down, throwing their riders, and highpowered slugs were taking out two or three Apaches at a time. Flame-split chaos ran through the cutting. The charge broke, and in a huddle the Apaches raced back around the bend.

In the lifting smoke Quentin looked for Lieutenant Thomas, but couldn't find him. The stage door gaped open and its interior was empty. Had they both gone down under the first Apache fire—Thomas and his sister?

"Thomas! Lieutenant Thomas!"

"Here!"

In the smoke-blackened figure that lurched up Quentin hardly recognized the young lieutenant from West Point. His jaw set hard and his eyes blazed.

"You damned fool! You led the stage right into Skullface's ambush! You took the road I ordered you not to take."

The savage fury that Quentin had been trying to repress had broken its bounds. One more ghastly frontier mess had been cooked up by a raw shavetail.

"But I—I thought—"

"You have no right to think when you

have your orders. By the Eternal, Thomas, if we get out of this my report on you is going to throw you out of the Army!"

The young lieutenant went rigid.

"I—I—"

"No back talk out of you. Skullface will come again and again until he swamps us. Keep your mouth shut and fight your platoon."

"Y—yes, sir."

Up to the bend the gut lay clear of Apaches, but now the rattle of riflefire increased from the rock walls overhead and bullets slashed into the ambushed troopers. Quentin felt his hat jerk on his head and heard the startled curses of hit men. It was the old Apache pattern of ambush, and Skullface was a master at it. The fire from overhead would whittle down the defenders and Skullface would deliver the charge that would finish them off.

"Lieutenant Thomas! Lay your fire on those Apaches showing above the rock . . . Sergeant Getty!"

The big sergeant came forward, calmly reloading his shot-out Colt.

"Take ten of your best marksmen and get up on the rimrock by that track the engineers made." Quentin pointed to the trail that ran at a steep slant to the top of the ridge. "We both know what it's like up there—a flat plateau. Clean that plateau of those Apache riflemen and be ready to rejoin us for a breakout at an instant's notice. We've got to clean that rimrock or they'll get us one by one!"

The sergeant saluted. "We'll clean it for you, sir, like a barroom swamper mops the floor!"

CHAPTER II

No Spinster, This

GETTY barked his orders, then he and his men were swarming up the track to the ridge top. The Apache fire slackened as Lieutenant Thomas' fire swept the rimrock and Getty's detail disappeared. Quentin turned back to survey his battlefield, the pressure of combat slackened for the moment. But it would return and it would be relentless until this battle was fought to its finish.

His firing line was up in a tight knot of tough men, the horses well back around the bend with the horseholders. They could hit Skullface's charges through the cleft with heavy losses. They could hold out a long while if Getty's gunfire could clear the plateau from overhead ambushers. And the fort was only eight miles away, its watchtower sentries by his orders sweeping the desert with high-power glasses.

"Yaqui," he ordered, "strip the saddle blankets off those dead horses. Pile them up and fire them with oil from the stage's lantern supply. Put up a smoke for the fort to see."

"Plenty big trouble smoke," grunted Yaqui. "Fort better come damn quick or—" He lifted his mane of hair and let it drop. "Run for desert, Skullface circle and—"

"That's it, Yaqui. We make our stand here. Whatever Skullface gets we make him pay for. So far we're making him pay for about five dead and I don't know how many wounded."

"Six," a girl's voice behind him said, and Quentin whirled around. "I'm taking care of them under the stage."

Clear gray eyes looked into his. This girl's face was fresh and lovely, untouched by desert sun. Her small chin was resolute. In her blue riding clothes that looked like a trooper's, she was a slender figure he had missed in the smoke of gunfire. This was no spinsterish schoolteacher, but a charming girl. Amazement rode him.

"I'm Lieutenant Thomas' sister, Hope Thomas," she said.

Apache rifle fire broke and bullets slashed the leather of the stage behind her. The cloth of his own shirt ripped at his side.

"Get under cover instantly, Miss Thomas," he barked. "Stay there!"

She gestured toward the troopers who

were lugging two limp figures.

"There are two more to go under cover first, Captain Quentin. Why not take some cover yourself?"

"Because I'm in command of this action."

One arrow winging down from the rimrock, one Apache rifle trained accurately and this girl would be finished. Panic swelled in him, and rage.

"Get under cover, I said!"

"I heard you tell my brother that you were going to have him thrown out of the Army for disobeying orders. I want you to know first that it wasn't my brother's fault we took this road. I forced—"

"Get under cover!" There was a lash in Quentin's voice. "And that's an order. Can't any of the Thomases obey an order?"

Anger that matched his own began to flash in the girl's eyes. In her there seemed to be a fighting spirit.

"Do you have to give your orders so abusively, Captain Quentin?"

"This is a battle, not a drawing room," he snapped. "Get under that stage!"

A trooper crawling from beneath the coach stood upright. "They're ready for you, ma'am. One of 'em bleeding heavy."

"I'll go."

Hope's eyes unlocked from Quentin's, but she did not turn. She was staring past his shoulder and upward with a look of shock.

"On the rimrock! That—that Indian!"

Quentin pivoted and sent his own glance upward. In the cleft between two big boulders loomed a tall figure that looked like a devil out of hell. The gaunt, almost fleshless face was streaked with vermilion and ochre. The deep-socketed eyes glared balefully. The beaded headband stretching across the broad, intelligent forehead was that of a chief.

Skullface! Surveying the battle for himself.

The steady rattle of Getty's detail was clearing the plateau on his side, but the Apache was protected from him, unseen in his crevice.

"Skullface!"

QUENTIN whipped up his Colt, caught Skullface's headband in its sight and squeezed trigger. Only an empty clicking came. Dimly he was aware that he had been firing as well as commanding in the battle.

"Shot out!"

Skullface stared on. His bony face twitched, into his primitive eyes came an expression of ghastly covetousness. His tongue touched the corners of his lips.

"A-a-a-h!"

The wild screech and the shot came together behind Quentin as he was frantically cramming shells into the cylinders of his gun. Lead richocheted off the rock beside Skullface's head.

Yaqui bounded up level with Quentin and poised for a second shot. He writhed at sight of his torturer with a fury that made his good hand shake like a leaf. He fired again and missed. Skullface stared down at him contemptuously and spat. Then he was gone, vanished into the depths of the cleft as Yaqui's last shot went uselessly after him.

"All right, Captain Quentin," said Hope, in the silence that fell. "I'm taking cover with the wounded."

She disappeared under the stage to the sounds of waning battle. The rimrock was almost clear of ambushers under the fire of Lieutenant Thomas, and Getty on the plateau. And from behind the stage the blaze of blankets sent its pillar of oily black smoke straight up into the desert sky.

"The fort will come fast now, Yaqui," said Quentin. "Skullface is up against time."

"Skullface will damn time. Skullface see white woman. Skullface want woman."

Quentin shook a little. He knew only too well Skullface's reputation with women and his pursuit of white ones. So far he had had as his prisoners only women from the haciendas south of the Border, never an American. But the warning in his eyes as he stared at the beauty of Hope Thomas had been plain to read. In his savage passion he wanted her, and he would kill her defenders to the last man

to get her.

"He'll try to swamp us with a mass charge as soon as he gets back to his crew, I figure."

Quentin raised his head, startled. No shots and Apache whooping carried to his ears. Then he realized that the firing had slackened, and in a few more shots it ended and utter quiet fell on the cut.

"There! He's with them now. A quick pow-wow and they'll be on us."

He stood staring up the cleft to the bend, littered with the dead Apaches and ponies. He was living in an eternity of nerve-tearing silence that carried a deadly menace. With the smoke signal rising to bring the fort's troops on the gallop, was Skullface going to pull out before he was caught between two fires? Was it only a small force of raiders the Apache chief had out of sight beyond the bend, or was it an army.

Quentin had to know, and there was a way to find out.

"Lieutenant Thomas, here!" he called, and Thomas came fast, and saluted. "I want to know what's going on up yonder behind the bend. If Skullface is massing for a charge without the Indians' traditional whooping in advance, and how big a force he has. Mount a squad of eight men, go forward, and send a point to look around that bend without exposing it. Then come back here and report. On no account are you to take your men around the bend! Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Thomas called out names rapidly and went for the horseholders. He walked his scouting detail past Quentin and put the troopers into a trot. Quentin lifted his cavalry scarf and wiped at a forehead damp with the sweat of reaction. Heaviness was in his limbs and a dull weariness was creeping into his mind. The strange silence still brooded over the battlefield, seeming to intensify with the dragging passage of each moment.

IT BROKE into a maelstrom of yelling. Around the bend poured a score of mounted Apaches, driving furiously for Thomas and his scout detail, now more than halfway to the turn. The attack came like a bolt from the blue.

"Fire!" yelled Thomas, as he reined down.

Flame-split smoke roiled from the muzzles of the troopers' Colts, and Apaches went down. Again and again the revolver fire crashed as the troopers emptied their cylinders. Howling, the Apaches yanked down their ponies, whirled, and faced for the bend in panic.

"Draw sabers! Charge!"

Thomas' command rose high in triumph. His saber ripped from its sheath and glinted above his head. Eight sabers rose in answer, and in a storming column the troopers fell in behind him.

"Halt, you fool!" shouted Quentin at the top of his lungs. "Come back!"

But no command could penerate to Thomas in the mad excitement of the charge. He flashed out of sight behind the bend and his squad flashed after him. The far drumming of hooves drifted back along the gut, a ragged burst of shots broke out. Then, in an insane crescendo, the Apache yelling swelled.

"Young nantan no come back," Yaqui said somberly.

"No, the crazy fool won't come back. And neither will any of his men."

A raw lieutenant, gone berserk in the heat of combat, seeing his enemy in rout before him, had flung away himself and his eight good troopers. Skullface had done it again! He had struck the scout detail with a bait party, whirled them around in flight and drawn the palefaces into his hands around the bend where no covering fire from their comrades could protect them.

"One come back," said Yaqui.

A flying horse burst into sight, blue-clad rider low on its neck. He straightened as he drove his mount along the cleft and pulled up in front of Quentin. Apache steel had slashed his shirt to ribbons. The chevrons dangled in a torn strip.

"The rest of them, Corporal Hutton?" flung out Quentin. "Quick man!!"

The horror of what he had seen still widened Hutton's eyes and twitched his sunburned cheeks.

"Gone, sir. I was riding rear when we went around the bend. There they was—waiting for us in a gauntlet both sides of the cut. I never saw so many Apaches in my life! Down the middle with no chance of stopping the gallop went the lieutenant and the rest. Them Apaches jumped 'em from both sides, two, three Apaches to a trooper, and pulled 'em off their horses. They had no chance at all for more'n a few shots. Somehow I got my horse around and ran for it, slamming through a crowd of them copper devils. God's good mercy it is, I got through."

"Yes, it is. Were any of the men still alive that you could see?"

"The Apaches was piled on 'em like so many ants. They was down. The lieutenant had busted loose and was putting up one hell of a fight. The Apaches hadn't shot any of 'em."

"Skullface wantum prisoners," said Yaqui. "More fun later."

Take the twenty-odd able troopers left to him and charge against Skullface and his hundreds in a mad effort to free Thomas and his men? The thought pushed itself into Quentin's mind. Throw his own men away in a hopeless try for rescue? That was just what Skullface wanted him to do, what Skullface had no doubt plotted for him to do.

Yaqui's head came up and he turned it to the west.

"Listen," he said. "Listen to troops. Fort come."

CHAPTER III

They Are Expendable

QUENTIN caught the sound the Indian's ears had picked up. High and thin and far away the notes of brass raised, the bugle blaring that help was on the way.

"Listen some more," said Yaqui. "Listen to Skullface."

The muffled drumming began out of sight around the bend. It mounted into a thunder of unshod hooves pounding on sand and echoing between rock walls. And it was going away, out of the cleft onto the desert.

"Skullface hear horn. Skullface run. Yaqui go scout." He broke at a fast lope for the bend.

A bellow rose from the rimrock behind Quentin. Sergeant Getty showed, there, waving his carbine, and shouting:

"Injuns skedaddled up here! Dust coming fast from the west, Cap'n, Hooray! Head of the relieving column just galloped in sight out on the flats."

"Come on down, Sergeant! Battle's over."

"It's over?" said Hope. She had come out from under the stage and stood beside Quentin, looking down the cut where Yaqui had trotted around the bend. "It's really over? The Indians have run for it? And—and my brother?"

Yaqui reappeared at the turn, his hands moving in signals that it was easy for Quentin to read.

He said, "The Indians have really run for it, Miss Hope. They're racing for the Border out on the desert right now with nothing to stop them. Your brother and seven good men are with them as living captives. Yaqui signals no American dead beyond the bend."

"My brother and his men captured and you didn't go in after them, Captain Quentin? You sat here with your troops and let the Indians run off with them?"

"Exactly. I sat here with twenty-odd troops against two hundred, maybe three hundred Indians, and did nothing to rescue your brother who was carried away by his battle spirit and charged when he should have halted. The greatest good for the greatest number is the law that rules the frontier, Miss Hope. Your brother has made his second, and I'm afraid his last mistake. He got the stage into the ambush in the first place."

"I've told you already he didn't get the

stage into ambush. I've told you it wasn't his fault. I want you to know—"

Quentin lifted his hand. "Please," he said. "You did a remarkable job, Miss Hope, with the wounded. Now I have my own job to do, cleaning up the backwash of this action and giving the rescue troop its orders. As senior captain and Major Gaynor's adjutant I'm in charge of Fort Brunswick while he's away at Department Headquarters. I can't get into any argument with you now. We'll take up everything in its proper time at the fort. This business has to be reported immediately to Department."

"Army business first, human business any time Captain Quentin gets around to it." The girl's voice was steely. "If I were writing that paper, Captain Quentin, I would report Lieutenant Thomas for bravery and Captain Quentin for cowardice. . . ."

Slowly the pen scratched the last sentence on the stiff paper, and Captain Quentin leaned back in his chair, his breath coming in slow labor because of the heat in the bare-walled inner office of Headquarters. The haunting beauty of Taps had gone long ago, but it had brought no sleep to some of the officers and to a good many of the men in the post.

In the guardhouse by the gate lights burned, in the quartermaster's and ordnance buildings other lights showed where details were checking wearily on ammunition, horse gear and every supply in stock for a garrison at war. There was quiet over the parade ground under the myriad low-clustering desert stars, but it was an oppressive quiet, heavy with the tension of impending war.

Over in the stables the farrier's sledge still clanged on the anvil, piling up extra horseshoes against emergency. The challenge of the guard to the corporal making his rounds carried into the room where Quentin sat. Double sentries tonight watched the desert from the firing platforms. In the watchtowers guards scanned the horizon for the dull red glow that would mean Skullface had struck some unprotected ranch.

THE captain's sweat-drenched shirt clung to his body, tortured by the heat, and for the moment his mind, weighted by its problems, went dull. He rose from the desk and stepped to the window, drawing in the vagrant breeze that played over the dust of the parade ground.

He could see the cottages of Officer's Row, their lamps still lit. Behind the curtain of one of them Hope Thomas was waiting for him. He had told her he would see her as soon as possible, and before Taps he had sent over a message that he would be late. Now the back of the night's work was broken and he was going to cross the parade ground to her.

Tension that had nothing to do with Skullface's threat gripped him. He felt torn by conflict, but the conflict was inside himself.

Abruptly he turned as the light tap sounded on the rear door of the office, giving onto the parade ground. He crossed with quick steps and opened the door.

"Miss Hope! I—I—"

She stood framed in the lamplight, a dark cloak about her slim form, her face quiet and strained.

"May I come in?"

"Yes, do—ah—" he fumbled. "I was just on my way to you. Will you sit down?"

She seated herself across the desk from him. "There was no proper place to talk in Mrs. Lieutenant Bartram's cottage. The walls of the living room are paper-thin and I couldn't very well ask her to leave the house for our convenience. So I took the chance and came here. I have a great deal to tell you."

"Yes?"

She pointed to the yellow field telegraph form beside the sheets of paper in Quentin's handwriting.

"I know what's in that first brief telegraph report you sent to Department Headquarters. You gave it to Lieutenant Bartram to be despatched and he told me. Roughly it said, 'Skullface with three hundred braves ambushed stage from railhead today. Repulsed with heavy losses. Fort's casualties five dead, seven wound-

ed. Second Lieutenant Thomas and seven troopers carried off alive as prisoners. Full written report follows,' "

"That was it," said Quentin. He put his hand on the written sheets. "This is the detailed report I've just finished."

"And in it you have reported that my brother was responsible for the stage being ambushed?"

"Yes. That happens to be exactly what happened."

"It wasn't what happened," she insisted. "I told you before, my brother wasn't at fault for the stage taking the south road. I was. I made him take the short cut. And I felt I must tell you why."

"Why?"

Words came rapidly from the girl, clear and distinct. "The train was late," she said, "and I'd had a frightfully miserable trip what with the dust, heat and thirst. So when the stage came to the crossroads where the north and south roads to the fort met out on the desert and Walter told me he was to take the much longer north road, I lost my temper completely. I flared up and told him I wasn't going to suffer any more than I had to, that he had to take the short cut and never mind his orders. I guess the heat had worn my nerves out. I've always influenced him. I'm five years older than he is, and our parents died when he was ten. He's used to my telling him what to do, has always relied on my judgment. So he gave in to my temper and took the road south. You must change your report to clear him of blame, and state that I forced him to disobey his orders."

There was a long moment of silence. Up under the ceiling the green Arizona flies droned in a dreary monotony. This girl opposite Quentin was hostile, but she was honest to the core of her.

"You will clear my brother's record, won't you?"

QUENTIN sighed. She had to be hurt, cruelly hurt, and it would do no good to postpone the blow.

"It doesn't clear an officer's record to blame his error on a woman. To state that he obeyed his sister instead of his superior officer won't exactly help. The colonel isn't supposed to take his wife's orders in carrying out a campaign. There have been plenty of incidents like this before in the Army, Miss Hope. I'm sorry, but my report will have to stand, with you left out of it."

"I won't stand by and not defend my brother!"

Quentin shrugged wearily. "You've done all you can. You've been honorable in taking the blame. Your brother brought his capture on himself. Skullface's braves fired into his face, he lost his balance and charged around the bend, ignoring my orders in the heat of combat, and he got himself and his men caught."

"He was brave—brave!"

"Yes, Miss Hope, he was brave. And a brave officer, raw and inexperienced, out here is often little less than a reckless fool. He hasn't the trained instinct to tell him that Indians apparently running in panic are laying an ambush. Your brother has been captured, and for the time being that is that."

"You're not going to cross the Border and try to rescue him?"

Quentin touched a second telegraph message on the desk.

"Department's immediate answer to my first wire," he said. "It instructs me to hold this fort until infantry reinforcements arrive. That will loose the cavalry to go after your brother and Skullface. Meanwhile, we hold where we are to protect the settlers. Skullface would like nothing better than to have the three troops in this fort chase after him down into Mexico while he sneaks out on the flanks and raids the defenseless ranches.

"So there's nothing to do but wait?"

"Those are my orders from Department. I've been in command here since Major Gaynor went up to Department two weeks ago to present a plan for operations against Skullface, who was only sporadically raiding then. Now Skullface is in open war and he's scored a success that should bring a mass of loose Apaches flocking to him. Major Gaynor's plan will

have to be revised, of course, and he'll put it into operation when he returns here with the infantry. That's his wire to me. I've sent and received several other wires with Department besides the first one."

"And there's no way, no way to get my brother out of Skullface's hands?"

Quentin shook his head. "I'd hoped to find some wounded live Apaches after the ambush that we could hold for a trade with Skullface. But there weren't any. Their lightly wounded got away, and only their dead and dying were left behind. Out here when we have to we trade Apache prisoners for white captives held by the Indians. It's hushed up, but we'll do it every time. Skullface is cruel and vindictive, but he keeps his word. If we'd caught a dozen or so of his braves—" He stopped and spread his hands in a gesture of hopelessness. "Yaqui volunteered to scout after Skullface and see if he could trail him to his base. If we can catch Skullface in some box canyon when the cavalry is finally free to take the offensive, we might be able to get your brother and his men out."

"I've seen what Skullface did to Yaqui, as a prisoner." Hope's face looked years older in the lamplight. "Will Skullface do the same to my brother, while you and the cavalry sit here with your hands tied?"

"Please, Miss Hope, let's not discuss that," Quentin said desperately. "I can't allow you to sway me in Army business."

"There it is again! Army business has nothing to do with human business. To Washington and to you my brother is nothing but a cog in a machine. If the cog is lost another one is put in its place. My brother is—what do you call it?—expendable."

"Every officer and man out here is expendable, Miss Hope."

"He isn't expendable to me. I'm his sister."

"Officers' wives and officers' sisters have to wait out here, Miss Hope, when their husbands and brothers are captured or missing. It's terrible but it's so. I have hopes that Yaqui will come in with some news we can use that will break the suspense. In the meantime—"

Clearly the challenge of the guard from the gate carried across the darkened parade ground.

"Halt, you damned Injun! Officer of the guard!"

CHAPTER IV

Primitive Bargain

CAPTAIN QUENTIN swept to the open window. There was a flurry of noise and voices at the gate, figures burst from the guardhouse and the barrier swung open. Through it came a rider on the pony, holding a stick over his head on which white showed.

"Indian with a flag of truce from Skullface, Miss Hope," Quentin said. "We've got something at last. Will you go to your quarters, please? I'll notify you what has happened as soon as I can. It looks like some kind of a deal with Skullface."

"For my brother?"

"Let's hope so."

Quentin opened the rear door and as Hope passed through it she asked:

"You'll do everything possible to get my brother back safely?"

"I'll do everything that's humanly possible, Miss Hope. You have my promise on that."

Her eyes met his and there was anguish in them. Then they hardened.

"You haven't been very human this far, Captain Quentin."

She swung the door closed and he stepped back to the desk. He could see the Indian walking his pony toward Headquarters, with Lieutenant Connors, the Officer of the Day, and two armed troopers from the guardhouse escorting him. This was big stuff.

He raised his voice, sending it into the outer office:

"Headquarters bugler! Sound Officers Call."

The trumpet blasted off the porch. The

thump of Army boots and the shuffle of moccasins moved across the outer office and a tall, muscular Apache with the beaded headband and the manner of a sub-chief came into the inner office with his escort. Streaks of war paint, the worst sign there could be to Quentin, ran across his face and naked chest. A hand ax dangled from his belt and he carried a small hide bag in one hand.

"I am Charron," he said in Spanish. "From Skullface with message."

"Go ahead, Charron. I speak Spanish. So do most of these officers."

A circle of blue uniforms surrounded the Apache, some of the officers who had been snatched from sleep still fastening their tunics. Charron didn't even look at the enemies who ringed him. He held the bag over the desk, shook it open and two objects thumped on the pine wood, horribly clear in the lamplight.

"Damn his soul!" The curse broke from one of the officers.

Quentin shuddered in spite of all his experience during the grueling years of the frontier service. Here it was again, the inhuman cruelty of the Apache, the torn-off fragments of white prisoners.

A stout, balding officer wearing medical corp insignia stepped to the desk and picked up first a severed ear from which a bush of red-orange hair sprouted amid the blood, then a finger with the ring on it.

"They were alive when these were cut off," he said somberly. "The ring I've seen on Private Schultz in the hospital. Man's wedding ring. Old German custom."

"The ear belongs to Private O'Brien in my troop, Surgeon Major Ennis," said Quentin, choking. "His friends call him Bush-ear. I've had him for orderly, and a good one, often. Charron, speak your piece." His voice raised in fury as he flung the challenge in Spanish. "What is Skullface's message?"

"Skullface will send the young nantan and his men back to the white man's fort, piece by piece, like these that he sends as warning unless—"

The flow of stilted Spanish stopped. Charron glared.

"Unless what?"

"Unless the nantan fort chief sends the white woman in trade for Skullface's prisoners. Then Skullface send all white prisoners back alive and uncut."

The murmur that ran through the circle of officers was threaded with stark fury. Quentin's throat closed as though a vise had gripped it.

"Fort nantan chief send white woman back with Charron or one hour after dawn Skullface start cutting. At sundown Skullface burn what is left alive."

"Charron, you—"

"Skullface see white woman in ambush. Skullface want white woman. Skullface give eight pony soldier lives for one white woman."

INTO Quentin's mind flashed the picture of Skullface's savage features, eyes glittering with an avid animal covetousness as he stared down at the pale beauty of Hope. Yes, Skullface would trade eight lives for one white woman; he would trade the lives of eighty white prisoners if he had them. An insane desire possessed him, his primitive passions had been fanned into an overmastering flame.

Slowly Quentin scanned the faces of his fellow officers. Horror tightened every face, but in the eyes of each was the same expression he knew was in his own. When he spoke, he would speak for all.

"Your answer, nantan?"

"The answer is no!" Quentin's fist crashed on the desk. "Charron, if I want to I can order you slapped up against the wall and shot for a threat like that!"

Charron lifted the stick from which the white cloth drooped.

"When Charron carries this?"

Helpless fury swamped Quentin in a bitter flood. He felt the warm, salt taste of blood from his bitten lips. "No, you're safe to leave under a flag of truce. Where is Skullface?"

Charron shrugged. "What does it matter where Skullface is? He is a long, long way from here. Do I go now?"

"Yes, Charron. Get the hell out of here!

And tell Skullface when I catch him I'll nail his hide on the fort gate!"

Charron stared at Quentin contemptuously. The threat was an empty one and he knew it. He turned on a moccasined heel and made for the door.

"You can water and feed your horse, Charron. You can stop at the kitchen for some food and hot coffee. I don't want you or your pony collapsing out there on the desert before you get back to Skullface. Tell Skullface I'll give him blankets, beads, calico, tobacco, horses from our remount, cattle from our beef herd—plenty of them all—for his prisoners, but no Army officer ever traded a white woman in a prisoner's deal, or ever will."

"Haargh!" grunted Charron deep in his throat and went out the door.

In the crowded room hung the smell of pure savagery, the reek of Indian sweat and animal grease.

"Well, gentlemen," Quentin said slowly, "I guess that's about all."

The murmur of assent was unanimous.

Surgeon-Major Ennis put the ghastly relics in his tunic pocket. "We've had this before. We'll have it again. Out here every officer and man takes his chances of it. Any plans, Captain Quentin?"

"Major Gaynor and the infantry can't get here in less than two days, I figure. I'll try to formulate something in the meantime. I'll call for you gentlemen again when I want you. The pow-wow is over."

Quietly the officers filed out of the room and the door closed. Quentin sat at his desk in the empty office, drained of emotion. He let his head sink into his hands, elbows braced on the desk. There was no way to get Lieutenant Thomas and his men out.

"There is a way, Captain Quentin."

He jerked his head up, shocked. In his depression he must have spoken the words aloud. Hope Thomas stood directly behind him, the back door open.

"Oh, I've been listening, Captain Quentin. That Indian came about my brother, so I felt I had the right to hear what he said. I stayed behind and opened that door yonder a crack. I've studied Spanish, can speak it. I understood every word of Skullface's offer."

"Then you know the answer I gave him. It was the only one I could give him."

"It was the only answer you could give him as Captain Quentin. But it isn't *my* answer."

"What!"

She looked at him levelly. Her lips were tight-pressed and there was no fear in her clear gray eyes.

"It was my fault that all this happened, as you know. I am not going to let my brother and those seven men of his be tortured to death. I am going to trade myself to Skullface for them."

HORROR tore words from Quentin's lips. "You are not! You are mad! You saw the way Skullface looked at you. Do you know what would happen to you if you were traded?"

Hope's hands reached down to a point above her knee and smoothed out the light silk of her dress to show the bulge that could be only one thing.

"Thirty-two extra light special Smith and Wesson, strapped on. I think they call it the Lady's Friend. When Skullface makes his first move at me—"

"No!"

"You say Skullface keeps his word. My brother and his men will have been freed. When Skullface and I are alone together, as I suppose we shall be after he has started his prisoners on the way home, and he advances on me I am going to get Skullface first and end this war I feel I am to blame for."

"End the war? Why the mere act of trading in a white woman is a complete surrender to the Apaches! Every Apache between here and the Mexican Gulf will rush to join Skullface. Others would break out of the reservation. If you got him and shot yourself Charron or some other subchief would step into Skullface's moccasins, that's all."

"I still—"

His voice hardened. "No more, please, Miss Hope. Go back to Mrs. Lieutenant

Bartram. She'll tell you the same thing I have. She's an army wife. Better ask her to give you a sedative. In the morning you will have a different point of view, I am sure."

"In the morning my brother and the others will be dead!"

"Miss Hope, you must not—"

Yes, they'd be dead and as likely as not the next night Skullface would send some of his young bucks under cover of darkness to creep up close to the fort to throw pieces of Lieutenant Thomas and his men over the wall.

"Will you go?" he asked Hope. "Or must I take it a direct order as commander of this fort and if you refuse to obey it, send you back to Mrs. Bartram with a guard?"

Rigidly she walked to the door, opened it, and went out. The lock clicked and Quentin stared at blank wood. She hated him, she would hate him for the rest of her life. The Army was even crueler to its women than to its men when the situation called for it and order had to be obeyed.

CHAPTER V

Pursuit

LEANING back in his seat, his whole frame sagging, time passed in a haze for Quentin while sweat flooded his body. The drone of the flies was unendurable, the clang of the farrier's late-working anvil sent his overstrained nerves jangling. He fumbled out a cigar and lit it, but there was no solace in the smoke, only an acrid burning. He swung up and went fast into the outer office.

"Sergeant-major," he told the noncom behind the desk, "I'm going out for a breath of air. I'll be on the firing platform by the gate if I'm wanted."

He walked fast off the porch, but on the parade ground his leaden feet seemed to weigh him down. When he reached the gate he took the sentry's challenge and climbed to the platform. Still a prey to hopelessness, he stared out at the moon-washed, limitless desert.

He came suddenly alert at the sound of trotting hooves. A rider was heading for the gate from the direction of the cook-shack and his teeth gritted on each other, not from alkali dust.

"You can open the gate, sentry," he called down. "That's Charron, going back to Skullface."

The gate creaked open and Charron increased his trot as he saw the desert beyond. From behind the corner of the guardhouse under the firing platform a dark-clad figure in riding kit darted to the side of the horse and rider.

"Charron, I'm coming with you!" rose a cry in Spanish.

"Hope!" shouted Quentin. "Hope!"

He was too late. Charron's arm went down to sweep her upward and she was on behind him. The Indian drove his heels into his pony's flanks and it charged for the open gate in a burst of speed. At the last instant Charron swerved his mount into the sentry and knocked him flat.

Quentin had a glimpse of Hope rushing past below him, her pale blur of a face set in resolve. Then they were gone!

"Stable guards! Saddle a horse! Bring it here at a gallop!"

Quentin leaped to ground and raced the few steps to the gate as Lieutenant Connors, Officer of the Day, and several troopers rushed out of the guardhouse.

"What's up? What's happened, Quentin?"

"Charron got Hope Thomas! He's running for the Border. I'm going after him. Ask your questions of the sentry."

The horse was galloping fast from the stables, the trooper in charge of it buckling the bridle strap back of its ears on the run. Quentin vaulted into saddle and drove his irons.

In moments the fort was behind him and his mount was spurning sand, but he had no hope in him. Charron was out of sight with a flying head-start. He would dodge and turn and lose himself in the belt

of shadows building now on the wasteland as the moon slipped behind a cloud bank.

Minutes passed, and finally Quentin pulled his horse down on the crest of a sand dune, staring out at the miles that held no sign of fleeing pony and riders. He had lost the pursuit. Something moved in the nearby mesquite and he ripped his Colt from holster and leveled it.

"Out of there, you!"

"Yaqui come, no shoot Yaqui. Yaqui see nantan coming."

Dust-filmed from headband to moccasin toes, Yaul advanced noiselessly.

"Horse break leg many miles back. Yaqui walking to fort."

"Charron's got the white girl, Yaqui! Did they pass this way?"

"They pass. Far, far off there, but Yaqui see 'um. Yaqui know where they go."

"Where, Yaqui, where?"

"Sweetgrass Canyon. Old Skullface hideout. Nantan knows canyon."

"Yes, I've patrolled through it."

Quentin's mind brought up the semi-circular indentation in the Border mountain wall, knee-deep in luscious grama grass and with a fresh spring flowing into a stream along a sandy bed. Then the grass bowl vanished in the jagged cleft running south for miles before it broke into a wide canyon, a cleft so narrow in some parts that it was hardly six feet wide.

A DOZEN Apaches could hold those sections while Skullface and his entire army single-filed it on their ponies to safety!

"Pony herd in grass. Skullface's braves in wickiups on sand bed. Yaqui follow all the way and Skullface no see." Yaqui's good arm transcribed a circular motion that Quentin followed readily. It indicated a long trailing from the malpais ridge of the ambush due south to the Border wall, and along it for many miles to the site of Sweetgrass Canyon well to the east of Fort Brunswick. "Skullface stay in canyon only one night to be close to fort. Go south tomorrow. Yaqui creep close to braves and hear talk."

"Skullface's prisoners? Lieutenant Thomas and the others?"

"No killum yet when Yaqui leave. Takum into canyon."

"And now Charron has Lieutenant Thomas' sister. Skullface offered to trade the soldiers and the lieutenant for her. Of course, I refused. But Miss Hope offered herself in trade and got Charron to carry her off."

Yaqui tapped his head with his stump. "White woman loco."

"Yes, she's loco," Quentin said bitterly.

"Skullface has cave in top of rock at canyon mouth. Yaqui know cave well when slave to Skullface. When Skullface take a woman from hacienda, take her there. If squaw fight him—" He made a significant gesture of a knife being drawn across his throat. "This time he take white woman there."

Quentin closed his fists hard. Skullface in a desert lair, with his braves camped in the canyon cleft below, was impregnable to attack by force from the front. But he would be alone in the cave at the top of the rock with his prisoner until dawn.

He drew his field message pad from his tunic and began to write. Finished, he handed over the sheet to Yaqui.

"Take my horse and ride hell-for-leather to the fort with this for Lieutenant Connors, Officer of the Day. He'll give you what I've ordered on it. Then come back to me here. We've got the dark hours to work in. Yaqui, you've done a tremendous haul on your pony. Can you stand a gallop from here to Sweetgrass Canyon, and a thousand to one chance at the end of it of getting Miss Hope out?"

"Yaqui ride till Yaqui die to get Skullface." The Indian raised the paper. "This bring pony soldiers?"

"That brings no troops, Yaqui. There's no chance of pushing troops into Sweetgrass Canyon without their being seen, and they'd be ambushed while Skullface ran for it. No, just you and I are going in, Yaqui, and a handful of reinforcements."

Yaqui's good eye darted here and there over the moonlit desert.

"From where?"

"No, you don't see them, and you won't see them until we get to Skullface's canyon. I'll give you the plan on the way. Get going for the fort, Yaqui. . . ."

Quentin swayed tiredly in saddle as his mount walked slowly up the mesquite and malpais ridge. Its flanks heaved from the speed he had put it to, and now twenty-five miles of desert lay behind. He and Yaqui didn't have to arrive at Sweetgrass Canyon with unspent horses for an attack, so he had ridden furiously because the time was short.

Reaching the top, he turned in behind a huge boulder with its base screened with thick mesquite, and dismounted. He tossed his reins to Yaqui.

"Tie up, Yaqui. Meet me around front of this boulder for a look-see."

He passed around the rock and looked south. Two miles away reared the blur of the Border wall. There amid its shadows Hope Thomas was alone in a cave with Skullface, and eight white men were prisoners.

"We make it to the canyon in the next jump, Yaqui. Where will the white men be held? In the wickiups in the stream bed?"

"White prisoners come now, nantan. Skullface keep his word."

YAQUI'S mangled arm went out as a pointer, but Quentin could make out nothing. The incredible vision of the Indian had annihilated distance and shadow. Then a blur of movement far out on the desert became visible, moving slowly toward the ridge. It came on, and Quentin made out a single file of riders, ten of them.

"Brave in front, brave behind."

Instinctively Quentin drew his revolver half out of holster.

"Skullface hear shots. Yaqui gettum braves. No shots."

"Okay, Yaqui."

No white man could match an Indian for soundless disposal of an enemy, Quentin knew. He crouched back in the thicket with Yaqui breathing softly beside him.

A broad-chester brave with a rifle slung over his shoulder passed at the file's head not ten yards from Quentin's hiding place, and behind him plodded Lieutenant Thomas. His figure was sagging with dejection and a wild misery was on his white face. After him came the other seven troopers, every man with wrists tied behind him. They passed over the crest of the ridge in melancholy silence, as the second Indian guard some five yards behind the procession was topping the crest.

Out from the mesquite thicket went a silent shadow, cut in behind the mounted Indian and leaped onto the pony's back. Yaqui's maimed arm went around the Apache's throat and jerked back, stifling any yell. Yaqui's steel glinted in the moonlight and plunged into the naked back between the shoulder-blades.

The body slid to the sand and Yaqui sat erect, holding the dead buck's lance. He put the pony into a trot to the top of the ridge as Quentin burst from cover and followed him.

CHAPTER VI

Woman's Weapons

ON THE down slope, only yards away, the file of riders walked on with Skullface's Indian in the lead. There was only a tiny hissing of the feathered lance through air as Yaqui flung, then the thump as it struck. The Indian slewed sideward and went to ground, with Yaqui's lance driven halfway through his body. Death had struck two braves in utter Indian silence.

"Yaqui gottum."

"Good work, Yaqui. Free the prisoners."

Yaqui trotted forward with his knife out and cut away the ropes that tied the prisoners' wrists, pointing back to Quentin on the ridge crest. Then the troopers were around Quentin, dismounted and staring in incredulity.

"All right, men," he said. "Never mind any questions from anybody. Yaqui and I are here, and you're free. I want Lieutenant Thomas."

"Here, Captain Quentin."

"We've come to make a try at getting your sister out, Thomas. Have you seen her? She made a break from the fort with Charron, Skullface's sub-chief, after I refused to give her up in trade for you."

"I—I've seen her." The wild misery deepened in Thomas' face. "She was brought past us in our wickiups on the stream bed and taken up the cliff face to Skullface's cave. I tried to call out to her, but the Apaches gagged me. Yes, I know of the deal. Skullface told me about it and I told him you'd be damned before you turned a white woman over to him. So she—she ran away from the fort?"

"Exactly."

"God, I ought to be shot for what I've done!"

"Stop it, Lieutenant Thomas. The facts can't be altered by self-recrimination. There'll be no criticism of you here from me. My job and the job of all of us is to save your sister from Skullface. Give me the layout of Skullface's forces in the canyon. Where's his pony herd and who's guarding it?"

"It's at the western end of the grass with a few Indian boys in charge. Skullface's braves, about two hundred and fifty, are scattered on the stream bed along the cleft. Half of them are loaded with tiswin they broke out so they could celebrate."

"Ah! Has Skullface got watchers out on the desert side?"

"Why should he, when the fort could have no idea where he is? He told me he's moving south soon after dawn. When my sister was brought in we were put on our cavalry mounts, tied and helpless, with those Indians as escorts. They were to cut us loose five miles from the fort and join Skullface somewhere in Mexico. You have a plan?"

Hope sounded in Thomas' voice.

"Yes. I got the whole layout of Skullface's hideaway from Yaqui here, and the disposition of Skullface's force from you. I'd expected to have to crawl into the canyon somehow to free you men, but now that we've met out here there's a break in the luck. You're my reinforcements, Thomas, picked up on the scene of action."

"But Skullface took our arms. He never gave them back."

"I didn't expect you to have arms. Yaqui brought sixteen Colts, and gunbelts filled with ammo from the fort in a sack tied on his horse, as well as ropes. You're armed now, Thomas, and on a desperate gamble. But I don't believe any of your men will want to draw out."

Bitter cursing rose from the troopers. Among them was one man with a bandage over his head where an ear would be missing, and another with stained cloth around his finger-stripped hand. Those two men wanted an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

"We're with you, Captain," came a concerted growl.

"Then rest yourselves behind this clump of mesquite. You'll be moving soon. Yaqui and I are going ahead. Over this way, Lietuenant Thomas, for my final instructions to you."

"Yes, sir," said Thomas.

Quentin walked a few yards away. When the lieutenant came up, he said, "This time, Thomas, you'll obey my orders to the last letter. You and your detail will be dead men if you don't. Still, there's a damned good chance you'll be dead men if you do."

LEAVING Thomas and the troopers, he hurried after Yaqui. They made a wide detour from the ridge in a blackout of the moon, and reached the Border wall unseen.

Bent low, Quentin followed Yaqui who moved through the brush at the base of the butte with Indian stealth, holding back the branches. Their horses had been left tied a quarter of a mile back. Now they were on the eastern edge of the grass bowl, up against the sixty-foot cliff face. Far across the circle of grass Quentin

could make out the blur of the pony herd with a handful of boys as sentinels. Two hundred yards from him gaped the dark mouth of the canyon cleft, and from it an occasional screech drifted to prove that some of Skullface's braves were not sleeping, but were howling drunk.

"Here, nantan," Yaqui softly said, and Quentin stepped into a cleared space against the wall.

Above him towered the limestone, but it was split in a chimney big enough for a man to climb through, with handholds of rock and roots jutting from its sides.

"Yaqui get away from Skullface by this last time. Yaqui go up ahead with rope."

The Indian thrust himself into the crevice, the coils of a pair of lariats over his shoulder, and began to climb. He went fast, making his one good hand do the work of two. Soon he was on the crest and rope hissed down at Quentin's feet. Quentin tied it under his armpits, gripped it and went up, finding his footholds.

Then he was on the flat top of the butte and he and Yaqui were moving over it fast for the rim of the cleft. A ghastly tension rode him. He had no idea whether he would be in time to save Hope from Skullface, could only keep on going with the desperate plan he had launched. Up here on the butte in a world of moonwash and shadows everything seemed unreal, and anything could happen.

He stopped abruptly as Yaqui gripped his arm. The Indian pointed to the gnarled stump of a tree jutting at the cliff's edge and lifted his rope. They had reached the rock directly above the cave where Hope had been taken!

Yaqui made a signal for silence and went soundlessly forward, crouched low. On hands and knees he peered over the edge of the butte into the canyon below. Quentin strained his ears to their limit.

For you take the high road and I'll take the low road.

From out of the shadowy night came a girl's voice in the old folksong. It was low and clear, then it broke in what sounded like a sob. Hope was singing to herself in her hour of despair, trying to keep up her courage. And she wouldn't be singing unless she was alone.

"Hope!" he gasped. "Hope, where are you?" Suddenly Yaqui was back beside him. "Yaqui, I've just heard Hope Thomas singing! Where—how—."

Yaqui pointed to a spot three yards off. "Smoke hole for cave. She down under it."

Quentin made it to the backened crevice in the cave's roof in two steps. He threw himself prone and laid his lips to the orifice.

"Hope! Hope, are you there?"

There was an instant of paralyzing silence then the girl's voice came. "Who—is it?"

"Quentin and Yaqui. Are you all right?"

"Yes, so far. I've been left alone while Charron talks to Skullface."

"Thank God!' His breath burst in a sigh of relief. "Listen carefully, Hope. This has got to be quick. I've freed your brother and his men who were on their way to the fort, and they're waiting a couple of hundred yards from the western edge of the grass bowl. They'll come fast when I signal. I'm coming down to you on a rope and Yaqui and I will hoist you up here to the butte top. If you're left alone for five minutes more we'll have you out!"

"I won't have that long," she said. "I can hear Charron coming now and there are six Apache guards at the foot of the cave path."

Even as she spoke a harsh voice came to him from the base of the cliff, and he heard grunts answer it.

"Then I'm coming instantly, and take my chances."

"No—wait! Charron said he'd get Skullface out of the way on some pretext and come for me alone. You see, I've split Charron and Skullface."

"You what?"

"Charron wants white women, too, and I played on that on our ride here. I told him Skullface is an old man and that I'd prefer him, Charron. So he's going to get rid of Skullface and take me over the cliff top with him—he thinks—and make for

his own territory. He's Skullface's subchief, yes, but he's from a different tribe. I figured to let Charron get me from the cave to the butte top by way of the notched log they use for a stairway—it's lying here on the floor of the cave but is too heavy for me to lift. Then after my brother was freed and we were well away from the canyon I planned to use my gun on Charron and try to make it to the fort."

"Christopher! You plan deep!"

In a hopeless situation, faced by the choice of self-destruction or submission to Skullface, this girl had pulled out of her feminine arsenal a stronger weapon than any gun. She had played one savage against another, both crazily desirous of her, had set Charron at Skullface's throat. She had a hard, steely courage as well as a flashing brain.

Stones dislodged by oncoming moccasins rattled on the cave track, coming nearer.

Quentin called, "Let Charron get you up the log to the butte top, Hope. Yaqui and I will get him. And we'll get him quietly. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you."

From Yaqui, now lying on the lip of the canyon, came a soft call:

"Charron come. Right below."

Quentin went mute, listening at the smoke hole. He heard Charron's feet moving at the entrance to the cave, then his voice, speaking Spanish. There was triumph in it.

"Charron has taken care of Skullface."

"Then get the log up quickly, Charron!" Hope said in Spanish also. "Is there any danger from below?"

"No danger ever again from Skullface," said Charron. "Skullface has the tequila I gave him in his hand and is even now drinking it. When Skullface drinks its last drop that is the last of Skullface. Haarrrgh!"

Quentin heard him pant as the weight of the heavy notched log came up. Quentin crawled for the edge of the cliff from which Yaqui had drawn back a couple of feet. He flattened there as the top of the log came up over the rim of the canyon and rested against the rock.

"You come," he heard Charron call to Hope.

He drew his gun. Yaqui's knife slid out. Whether Hope or Charron would be first up the log and onto the cliff top, Charron was soon going to be a dead Apache. The sky had paled in the east and false dawn crept in a dim light above the canyon.

"Ready, Yaqui?" Quentin whispered.

"Yaqui ready."

CHAPTER VII

Battle for Life

THE sound of footsteps swept up from the track below with a deadly swiftness, then Quentin heard Charron grunt in shock. The log top wavered as though its bottom had been suddenly shoved, and Quentin scrambled forward.

As Quentin got his head over the rimrock he heard a harsh, swift barking in the Apache tongue. The tall figure of Skullface loomed up, racing the last yards of the ledge to where Charron faced him with a glare in his eyes and his hand going for the knife in his moccasin top. It never reached steel.

Features writhed in demoniac fury, Skullface barked again and, with the leap of a cougar, he cleared the space between them. His throwing ax smashed down in a frightful blow that drove its stone clean through the front of Charron's forehead.

Charron went down, arms outflung, body sprawled on the ledge beside the notched log. Skullface stepped back.

"Yaqui hear what Skullface say," the scout whispered in Quentin's ear. "Charron put Apache poison in Skullface's tequila but Skullface smell a rattlesnake somewhere and order another brave to drink it. Brave die quickly, Skullface come after Charron."

They watched as Skullface turned and stalked to the cave entrance. As he stood there, Quentin knew he was savoring

Hope's pale beauty. Then he spoke.

"Charron try to take you from me. Charron is dead. Now I take you."

High and clear Hope's cry rose. "Captain Quentin! Come quickly!"

Quentin leaped to his feet as her voice tore into him. Ripping his gun holster and gripping its trigger guard with his teeth to leave both hands free, he raced for the log and swung onto it.

From down the track leading to the cave yelling erupted. Skullface's guards had seen Quentin's figure outlined against the sky, and were racing up the trail.

"Yaqui, take the guards! I'm going for Skullface!"

Quentin felt for the notches of the log with his feet and went slipping down. Suddenly the insecurely braced log swayed, slipped, and began to go over sideward. In horror, Quentin tried to slide down, but one foot caught in a notch. For a sickening second the log teetered, then crashed down along the face of the wall. Quentin landed on his side, the breath driven from his body and his gun jolted from his teeth. Appalled, he saw it skid across the rock and go over the rim of the ledge. But somehow he was up, pulling himself together and driving for the cave, bare yards away.

A shot from a small gun cracked in a sharp report and he heard Skullface bark. Then he was at the cave mouth, the scene clear before him in the first light of dawn, aided by the glow from a bed of embers in the rear of the cave. Skullface had Hope pressed against him, gripping her pistol hand, holding her with an arm around her waist. She had fired and missed, and now he was wrenching the gun from her. Skullface sent it flying into the dim reaches of the cave. Over the Apache's shoulder Hope's desperate face stared at Quentin.

"Captain Quentin!" she screamed, and he leaped for Skullface.

Skullface whipped around at the cry and the fierce blow that Quentin drove for his jaw only scraped it. Their bodies met in a crash and Skullface's arms went around Quentin, viselike. Quentin smashed his fist savagely into Skullface's side and felt he had hit rock.

The Apache was twenty years older than John Quentin, but the Indian's body was sheer muscle. Cheek to cheek they wrestled, and the rancid stench of grease clogged Quentin's nostrils. He felt as if he had an animal, feral and merciless, fighting him. His ribs cracked under the ferocious grip.

He got one foot behind Skullface's heel and tried to throw him, but Skullface's foot slipped away and they reeled blindly about the cave. Skullface heaved and Quentin's feet came up off the floor. In another second Skullface would hurl him bodily against the wall. Wildly he clutched at Skullface's long mane, tearing the hair backward. Skullface let out a grunt of pain.

QUENTIN'S feet hit the floor again and pangs shot up his legs. Pain was coursing all through him from the strain, his lungs labored, his eyes were going dim. As though from a distance he heard Yaqui's shots blasting down the track and the howls of the Apache guard that told of hits.

Skullface's ruthless grip was crushing the life out of him. In minutes more the bones of his chest would go and he would be the Apache's helpless prey. His hand, tangled in Skullface's hair, wrenched backward in a last yank and Skullface's mouth opened in a screech. Quentin was tearing the scalp off him! In a blinding second of clarity Quentin felt Skullface's grip relax, and the Apache broke loose, leaving a yard of space between them.

Quentin brought his right hand up from his knee with all the strength he could put into it, and the uppercut smashed full on the point of Skullface's outthrust chin. The bone cracked with a brittle snap. In the moment Skullface poised on his feet, motionless, his eyes glassy from the knockout blow, Quentin plunged forward, grabbed him by the throat and hammered his head against the jutting wall.

He felt the Apache's full weight drop onto his hands as blood trickled from his

mouth and he let go. Skullface toppled on his face, his tangled mane a welter of crimson.

Quentin stood back, gasping, hardly able to realize that the battle for his life and for Hope Thomas, was over. At last he panted:

"That does for him. Skullface has a broken skull. That jutting rock must have battered his brains out."

Hope darted past him and the next moment was out on the ledge, looking down into the canyon.

"Get the log up, Captain Quentin!" she called. "Half the Indians down there are running for the path."

He drew himself together and made it to her side. Halfway up the track to the cave four bodies sprawled as evidence of where Yaqui's gunfire had hit. Indians by the score were racing for the base of the trail, and their screams were high-pitched as they saw the two Americans on the ledge.

"They'll be on us before you can get that log lifted and in place!" Hope cried desperately.

"They will not, Hope. Listen!"

A thundering sound came from the mouth of the canyon where it debouched onto the grass bowl. Low at first, but it swelled into a vast tumult almost instantly. The screaming of panicked horses began to echo off the canyon's walls, shots cracked, and the shouts of American voices mixed in the uproar. The din drew closer at high speed.

"Your brother and the reserves coming in, Hope! The signal was six shots. Yaqui fired them into those Apaches. Then your brother and his crew stampeded the Apache pony herd into the canyon. Look!"

Already the first of the herd were plunging at the gallop into the narrow gut. Manes tossing, eyes rolling in fear, shrieking their panic, the ponies filled the gut from wall to wall in a solid mass, and under the weight of their bodies and hooves Apaches were going down. Skullface's braves were being stamped into destruction by a force they could neither fight nor dodge.

Apaches leaped for the walls of the canyon, desperately scrabbling for footholds that would take them up out of the reach of the thundering herd. Braves left on the canyon floor simply disappeared under the onrush of the ponies, running blindly, with the troopers' shots and yells driving them frantic.

Full dawn was lighting the scene now, and out in the grass bowl blue-clad figures on horseback were driving the drag of the pony herd into the gut.

"This time your brother is carrying out his orders! And he's doing it superbly. He's wiped out any past mistakes of his with the wiping out of Skullface's army, Hope. Once we reach the butte top we're clear."

THEY moved back from the cave mouth to the log lying beside the wall and Quentin heaved at one end. It came up, but it took all his strength to tilt it on its butt and lay it against the wall. Yaqui's face showed over the butte rim, grimacing as Quentin stepped back for breath.

"All right, Hope. Yaqui will brace the top. There's nothing in the way now."

Suddenly she screamed.

"Behind you! Skullface!"

With the roar of the stampede in his ears Quentin whirled. Skullface stood hardly three yards from him on the ledge, his face and head a mass of blood. He was alive! Not only alive but in full possession of his strength. Only stunned by a blow that would have split a white man's head in two, he was up and out for vengeance.

"Ha!" snarled Skullface. His eyes blazed in animal fury.

Quentin's empty hands opened and closed. In Skullface's hand a long steel knife gleamed. Skullface's arm went back over his shoulder into throwing position. At that range no Apache ever would miss.

"Yaqui!" shouted Quentin. "Shoot!"

From the butte top came desperate answer.

"Yaqui no reload. Only one hand."

Quentin stared at the poised steel, fascinated. In seconds only he would feel the

shock of it lancing into his heart. If he jumped for Skullface the Apache would drive it into him, not throw it. He stood still, rigid in every muscle.

"Damn you, Skullface!" he said.

"Ha!"

Skullface's arm started forward. It never went into the full throw. For down from above plunged a figure that landed full on Skullface, clamping a maimed arm around his neck.

"Yaaii!" shrilled the war cry.

Skullface staggered, lost his footing under the terrific impact of the body that had hit him in a mad dive. There was an instant when the two men showed on the rim of the ledge, Yaqui implacably wrapped around his enemy, then the ledge was bare. Over and over in space Skullface and Yaqui were whirling, falling straight into the rushing tide of the pony stampede.

A terrible sound carried up as Quentin and Hope stared over the edge of the cliff.

"That sound!" Hope shuddered.

"That was Yaqui laughing. All he's lived for, for years, is revenge on Skullface."

The twined bodies struck into the center of the stampede and vanished. Over them scores of hooves were driving, grinding them into fragments. Out on the grass bowl shots crashed and Quentin saw a man waving his officer's stetson. He raised his own hand in answer and circled it, pointing to the top of the cliff, making quick gestures.

Below, the drag of the stampede was passing the cave. Clinging to the canyon's walls, high up, was only a remnant of the Apache marauders. Skullface and his army were gone. The Border was safe!

"I've signaled your brother to withdraw and meet us out on the desert," Quentin told Hope. "It's over the butte now for us to the horses Yaqui and I tied up. The business is finished. And you were magnificent."

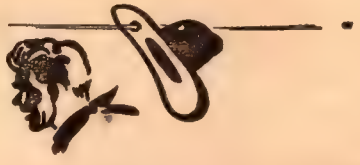
"Yes," she said swiftly, "the Army's business with Skullface is finished. But isn't there some business between you and me that isn't finished? Or rather that ought to be reopened? I've been utterly hateful to you, through ignorance."

"You were just new to the frontier, that's all."

Something pounded inside him. He had never felt toward a woman the way he did toward this glowing, courageous girl. And he knew he would feel that way toward her for the rest of his life. But all he said was:

"How you start isn't what counts out here, but how you finish. We'll reopen our acquaintance with a fresh start and a clear slate, and I hope—"

Yes, the human business between Captain John Quentin and this girl who meant everything to him was just beginning. But in her eyes he could already read how it would end.



COMING NEXT MONTH

CANYON RUN

A Crackling Good Novelet

By KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

Judge Bean's Bear

By LAURAN PAINE

JUDGE ROY BEAN—the Law West of the Pecos—is more than a Western legend. He also is a milestone. For prior to his coming—in a dead run, at that, from a corpse left behind in California with Bean's knife sticking in him—there was no law but gun law in the Trans-Pecos region.

After Judge Roy set up his law court in a saloon in Langtry, Texas, law of sorts became established. And some of the goldangdest legal decisions ever handed down came out of Roy's place. Many were hilarious, not a few were grim, and all enriched Roy Bean.

All were stories, though, which became Americana. And the tales about and concerning Judge Roy Bean are legion. They come in all varieties. Probably one of the best, though not often told, centers a full-grown bear Roy kept as a pet.

Bruno, as he called the big brute, had a cage but it hurt Roy to see him in it. And with good reason, since Bruno was

A pet bear helped make a monkey of Roy Bean, the ace of monkey-shiners

not long in outgrowing it. As he grew older the cage, which had been built when he was a cub, did not expand.

Bruno did.

It was natural—to Roy—anyway—that since Bruno was cramped in his quarters, he should not be kept in them as if he were on exhibition. So during the warm days he was chained to a post of the saloon's overhang, where he could exercise. And incidentally keep the loafers either far away from the saloon or inside it which was financially far better.

With a Single Mind

Bruno was well-fed and sassy. He and his master had a lot in common, aside from the fact that both were overweight. Both enjoyed grim practical jokes and good, clean—if dangerous—fun.

Like the time Roy was drowsing on his plank walk in front of the saloon and a tramp came ambling along. Roy roused himself long enough to listen to the whining pleas of the man, then jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"Go around in back. Maybe the cook's got something."

The bum hustled around the saloon with a wide smile. All was quiet for a moment, then the derelict came swooshing around the shack with a heart-rending wail that tickled the eardrums for a mile in every direction. He was no longer wearing his filthy coat, and with the condition of his trousers he presented an admirable opportunity for anatomical studies of bare flanks in high gear.

The racket brought Judge Bean to his feet with a thumping heart. He watched the hobo dip dust into his vest pockets as he leaned into a corner, then straighten out and disappear up the railroad tracks in a burst of amazing speed.

The judge again collapsed in his chair. It was all right. He just had forgotten he'd tied old Bruno around by the kitchen door.

The tramp had run smack into a sleeping bear. Startled at being run into by a knight of the road Bruno, with laudible righteousness, had taken one violent swipe at the intruder. And one had been quite sufficient.

Justice As Meted Out

In another instance—this was in 1892—Bruno did his master a good turn and served justice as well. A Mexican woman whose husband was a notorious drunkard came to Bean with a tale of woe a yard long. Roy listened in the shade of his saloon overhang and decided that Gonzalo should be taught a lesson in sobriety, once and for all. But he also knew that Gonzalo, always too drunk to work, would be a sorry source of revenue in the way of a fine.

After deliberation, he told his son, Sam, to get the spare chain and lock which were kept in the back room of the saloon ready to replace the one Bruno wore in case the bear ever should break away. Bean sent a man after Gonzalo, who was reportedly sleeping in the dusty shade beside a friend's jacal.

Gonzalo was duly brought before the majesty of the overweight judge, who was seated in sprawling grandeur under his overhang. The culprit was too inebriated to answer questions coherently, though. Roy ordered the drunken man to be chained to the door post, then had Bruno brought up and chained to the same post, but with less length to his tether.

Everyone was intrigued but Gonzalo, who promptly folded up in the dust and dozed. Bruno, surprised and interested in the drowsy Mexican, ambled over and sniffed at the man who slapped at him lazily, without stirring. The bear wrinkled his nose, raised a formidable paw and—*swoosh!*—Gonzalo was knocked a good ten feet. He sat up, sobered slightly, and when he saw what had hit him his face became a picture of pure terror.

What ensued was hilarious, although carrying out a conceivably just sentence. For some thirty minutes Gonzalo dodged and feinted. Only the chain kept Bruno, thoroughly aroused and playful, from murdering the Mexican. Gonzalo's pores oozed pure alcohol until he was very, very sober. Then Judge Bean ended the

fun by giving Gonzalo ten minutes to get out of the country, and awarding his long-suffering wife the two family burros, all the children and the hovel, allowing her a complete and uncontested divorce.

Bruno, the Beer Hound

Roy's perpetual pranks with Bruno made both of them the subject of much animosity. Once, when a trainman complained about the price of liquor in the judge's saloon, The Jersey Lily, and it was too hot to argue, Roy walked outside, turned the bear loose. He set him after the complainer who barely made it to the top of a boxcar a jump ahead of the snarling, gnashing-toothed Bruno. However, like similar pranks, Roy considered this all in good fun.

Their pranks likewise made Roy and Bruno the subject of much interested and speculative publicity. Roy taught Bruno to drink beer, which he consumed in such prodigious quantities, to the delight of the cowboys, that they rode for many a dusty mile to watch the performance. Roy never mentioned how that stimulated the sale of the Lily's beverages. As it also did when passenger trains came through Langtry.

At last, however, Roy overstepped himself and, like all good things, Bruno came to an end. A liquor salesman whom Roy delighted in gouging every time he came through town had set 'em up for the house, and had given a spanking new twenty-dollar bill in payment. The judge admired the bill contentedly, then clapped it into the cash drawer and forgot all about making change. There was some slight unpleasantness about it but, after all, Roy Bean was the Law West of the Pecos. So the drummer left without his change, but with a heartfelt determination to figure out a fool-proof way to get even.

His chance came some time later when he ran into the judge in an El Paso saloon. After greetings, in a tone of regret the salesman told Roy how sorry he was to hear that Bruno was dead. He claimed to have heard that from a man he had recently met who had just come through Langtry.

"I'll be damned!" Roy exclaimed, visibly shaken.

The drummer nodded solemnly, and went on, "Judge, you haven't forgotten, have you, that you once promised me if that damned bear ever died I could have the hide?"

Bean mumbled that he vaguely remembered something of the sort.

"Well, are you a man of your word?"

Roy shoved out his paunch until it was almost level with his chest. "You're damned right I am!"

"Well, I happen to have a telegraph blank in my pocket, so we can wire about that right now, before somebody else gets the hide. Will you sign it?"

A Trickster Tricked

Roy nodded glumly, and the drummer scribbled for a moment. Then he handed Roy a telegram to sign, one to the judge's son. It instructed Sam to skin Bruno and send the hide to the drummer at his hotel in El Paso. Roy gravely signed, and with a sigh turned back to his beer.

The hide was duly delivered the day Judge Bean took a train to return to Langtry. He arrived home in low spirits, and shuffled sorrowfully to The Jersey Lily Saloon. The first person he saw was his son, and the first question he asked showed where his thoughts were.

"Sam, what in hell did Bruno die of?"

"Buckshot, Judge."

Roy started so violently his body shook like jelly. "What? Are you saying somebody killed him, Sam?"

"Hell, yes," the puzzled Sam answered. "I did."

"For gawdsakes, why?"

Sam's ire flamed. "Well, dammit, I couldn't skin him alive, could I?"

It dawned on Roy then. He saw how the drummer had taken him in, and promptly was on the prod. He swore he'd shoot the man on sight. Prudence, however, was a virtue with that drummer. He never again returned to Langtry, Texas.

THE DENTON BRAND

By J. M. WELDON

FRANK BEACH and a man I had never seen before rode into Mangantown in the dead heat of the day. I saw them round the bend into Main Street at Griffin's livery barn, their horses knee-deep in the heat waves that flowed over the dusty street. I knew it was Frank from the way he sat his horse. He was a proud-looking man, and his horse looked proud, too; fresh and lively in spite of the awful heat—a big, black horse that held his head high and had a peculiar, sidelong gait.

I was the only one on the porch of Mangan's Saloon. Most folks in town were in behind their shutters, but some of the men were taking siesta at the bar. I didn't call to anybody, I just sat back and watched. And Frank never so much as looked in my direction when he passed.

FRANK BEACH

He was changed. Leastwise, he didn't wear that boyish smile any more. He stopped a little way on, across the street. I saw the light and easy way he left his mount and spun the reins around the hitch-rail at Liza Winters' Dining Place. He knocked on her door, and in a minute the door opened, and Frank and the man with him went inside.

Must have been a hundred and ten where I was sitting in the shade, but I didn't feel the heat. What I felt was the chill of a killing in my bones.

Frank Beach was a fool to show his face in Mangantown. Fact was, he probably didn't know Tom Denton was in Mangan's bar. But Liza Winters would tell him. She would for sure. For it hadn't but a month ago when Frank had been engaged to marry Liza!

Tom Denton was to have been their best man. But when change comes it rides powerful fast, and raises dust to blot out what used to be.

Them three. Folks had thought one time that it would be a sure match between Liza and Tom, but that had changed when Frank Beach came along. And folks had said Tom and Frank were closer than brothers, but that had changed.

NO MAN ever helped another more than Tom helped Frank. He went with him across the Border when Frank

It's a serious thing to brand a respected man a cattle thief

bought cows to start his herd. He helped him build his house. He gave him things. And when Liza told Frank yes, Tom was the loudest to congratulate, and acted like he was as happy as a lark.

They rode into town together every Saturday night. Even when Frank was courting Liza, the two of them would come in, and Tom would wait and drink in Mangan's place. Later, he and Frank would ride home together.

Then the thing had happened—Frank was to blame—that no man could overlook, and their friendship had died right then and there.

Some folks had thought, when it had all come out, that Tom should have shot Frank dead for what he had done to the feller who had done so much for him. Or leastways he should have let the other boys have their way. And it had been a wonder Tom didn't, because all that night he had been in a storm-cloud mood.

He'd mentioned before that he was losing cows, but he'd never got to really being mad. But that night when somebody asked what was eating on him, he'd banged his fist on the bar, and said:

"Dammit it, boys, I'm being robbed plumb blind!"

A puncher named Roy Perdum had said, "Maybe they just strayed, Tom, to get acquainted with Frank Beach's herd."

"Nope," Tom said. "Me and Frank been looking. We couldn't find a cow on his spread that wasn't marked with that great big brand of his."

This was serious business, but just about then Frank Beach had come in, and that had seemed to change everything. Tom Denton forgot about his cattle and set everyone up for drinks. Frank Beach's wedding was only four days off, and we did some jollying.

Mangan, who tended bar himself, also bought a round.

"Now, before you drink," he said, "I got a little something for Frank. Come in by yestiddy's stage."

We waited, everybody smiling, while Mangan put the box on the bar, pulled out the excelsior and finally displayed a handsome little china clock.

"This here clock's guaranteed," he announced, "and I'm proposing we drink to Frank and his new missus, that this here guaranteed clock tells only happy time for them!"

A roar of approval went up. Men clapped Frank on the back, and the drinks came fast. Jokes were whispered to Frank, thighs were slapped in hearty laughter.

Then, along about midnight, Tom Denton said, "Me and Frank got a long ride ahead. How about one of you boys getting Frank's saddle-bags so's we can pack this clock away." He looked at Frank and went on, "Less'n I miss my guess, Frank would more'n likely drop it right out his hands."

We laughed. So another waddy, Bill Watrus, fetched Frank's saddle-bags. He thumped them down on the bar.

Frank was listening to some married-man advice and laughing at it.

Tom said, "Hand over that clock, Mr. Mangan, careful-like."

He opened Frank's saddle pouch and hauled out a short branding iron, so short it wore a wooden handle. He thumped it on the bar, and put the clock inside the leather case. Then he picked up the iron to slide it in, handle first. But he stopped, looked at it, and the smile went off his face.

"This is a mighty peculiar iron, Frank," he said.

Not a sound of laughter in the whole saloon. Not a sound. And not a smile. Frank was staring at the iron, and every other eye was fixed on Frank.

It was a heart-sickening business, and the meaning of it seemed to crash down on everybody at once. The iron would burn a brand that looked like T D, but was just about half the height of the F B mark that Frank Beach used.

Tom Denton said, "Where'd you get this iron, Frank?"

"I dunno," said Frank. "Looks like T D. It must be yours."

"It ain't mine," Tom said.

"Then—then what?" Frank asked.

TOM DENTON turned his eyes away, and his voice was as chill as a Montana winter when he said, "It would sure make a handy little instrument if a man had the mind to change T D to F B."

Frank Beach paled, and went for his gun, but it never left the leather. Those men who had been laughing and clapping him on the back pinioned his arms, their faces grim.

Bill Watrus said, "We know what to do with brand-switching cattle thieves!"

Tom Denton poured himself a glass full of liquor and took a heavy swallow of it.

The anger in the voices, the snarling outrage that sounded in the men who minutes before had been laughing friends of Frank Beach had that ominous, unmistakable ring of death. Somebody got hands on a rope and noosed it. It was around Frank's neck when Tom Denton finished his whisky, and turned to look at his friend.

It was a hurt look, as though Tom were sick to death inside.

"What are we waiting for?" Bill Watrus growled. "Let's string him up!"

Tom said, "Why for you'd string him up, Bill?"

Watrus gasped. "For changing brands!" he shouted. "For stealing your cows!"

Tom's voice was quiet, his words slow when he said, "I ain't lost no cows."

"But you said—that iron—"

Tom turned back to the bar and poured another drink.

Bill Watrus spoke for all the boys. "There ain't no room for cow thieves here, Beach. So get! We're letting you go. But I'd swear on the Book there'll be a hanging if we ever see your face again in Mangantown!"

A month ago, that had been. And now Frank Beach had come back.

Frank and his saddle pard didn't stay long in Liza Winters' Dining Place. I watched them come out. They crossed the street and I knew they were coming to Mangan's Saloon. I got up and went inside.

Frank came through the swinging doors bold and brazen, like a man who's mad beyond the point of fear.

"Howdy, gents," he said.

Everybody looked, but nobody said a word.

"Howdy, Tom," he said to Denton when he saw him at the bar. "I brought a friend."

Tom Denton's eyes were glued to the mirror, watching what went on behind him. When Frank's friend came in Denton whirled, his sixgun out and spitting. And Frank Beach shot Tom Denton dead!

Frank's gun surveyed us all and held us back. His companion, dazed, and holding to a wounded arm, slowly got up off the floor.

"Can you tell them?" Frank asked him.

The stranger walked over to me.

"In my pocket," he said with a Yankee twang, "the right hand side."

I felt, and out took a paper.

"It's about the brand," the stranger said. "That paper's got the sketch. I made the brand for Denton some time back."

I looked at the paper and passed it around. Frank Beach holstered his gun and went to the bar.

He said, "It took some searching to find my blacksmith friend here."

Bill Watrus bought the drinks. He shook his head. "It's hard to believe of Tom," he said. "I wonder why—"

"I just talked with Liza," Frank told him. "He was jealous of Liza and me."

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THE LONG TRAIL

By BEN FRANK

The rattler's head weaved from side to side

BY THE time Johnny Martin Powell met the girl, he'd stopped looking back to see if anyone was following him. By then he'd dropped the Powell part of his name, too, and was calling himself Johnny Martin, for back home folks knew him only as Johnny Powell.

Back home—that was a small Kansas town on the old Cimarron River. Now Johnny was in the foothills of Wyoming where you could see snow in July, gleaming white between the ribs of the old Rockies.

And near the boulders, he saw this

He was raised as an outlaw — would he have to remain one?

girl. She was in a peck of trouble. No one had to draw a picture of that for Johnny.

During the past two hours, he'd been riding through a lush valley spotted with grazing cattle. Some carried a Diamond brand; others, a Lazy L. To Johnny, who'd grown up in cattle country, that meant one thing. Two outfits were taking over the same range, which spelled trouble. Thinking about this maybe was why he hadn't seen the girl until her horse began to snort and buck like mad.

At first, he'd though she was a boy since she was in levis and a blue shirt. But when she'd lost her floppy old hat, and her smoky-dark hair went whip-lashing out in the sun—well, that was when Johnny Martin turned downslope toward her, kicking his white-footed sorrel into a dead run. But he was a minute too late to save her a tumble.

Jack-knifing, the pony sent her sprawling. Scared, Johnny swung his sorrel around to where she'd fallen, sure he'd have to pick her up in pieces. But before he could get out of the saddle, she was on her feet, a small, willowy girl with nothing wrong but a scratch on the end of her straight freckled nose and a badly riled disposition.

"Damn!" she said, glaring toward her disappearing pony. "One buzz from that rattler, and my horse went crazy."

The next thing Johnny knew, she'd jerked a tiny snub-nosed pistol from a pocket and had turned toward the tumble of boulders. He saw the rattler then, a big fat killer coiled in the sun, his ugly hissing head weaving from side to side.

The girl lifted the toy gun and fired. She missed. She shot again and missed. Grinning, Johnny pulled his big walnut-butted six. The ugly head disappeared with the roar of the gun, and the rest of the sidewinder went twisting among the rocks.

The dark-eyed girl really looked him over then. She began with his sandy hair and brought her gaze down along his lean, brown face, his wide shoulders, his long arms and legs and big feet.

"Nice shooting, mister," she said.

Yeah, he could shoot, all right. He'd learned that from the Powell side of his family. Remembering, his face tightened.

Grinning sheepishly, the girl stuffed the small pistol back into a pocket of her levis. "I do better when I have a barn-sized target. I see you didn't catch my horse."

"No," he admitted. Funny how he liked her grin, her voice, the way her hair looked in the breeze and sun.

"Oh, well," she said, shrugging, "it's not much over three miles to the Lazy L. What's three miles when you're young and don't have corns on your feet?"

He liked the way her sense of humor came up on top, too.

"So you're Lazy L," he said. She couldn't be much over eighteen—he was twenty. "Noticed two brands scattered all through this valley. Lazy L and Diamond."

Again her dark eyes turned angry. She was small, pretty and clean, but she wasn't all sugar and spice.

"Until Grandfather died, Eagle Valley was Lazy L range," she said. "But now old Milt Evans has starting crowding us." Suddenly her eyes narrowed. "You're not a Diamond man, are you?"

"I'm Johnny Martin," he told her, "and just rode into this country today."

"I'm Jeanie Lang," she said.

They looked each other over again. Then by her slow smile, he knew that she'd made up her mind about him.

"Johnny," she said, "if it's not too far out of your way, how about giving me a lift home?"

With all those miles between him and his trouble back home, he guessed maybe he'd come to the end of his wanderings. Grinning, he held out his hand.

"It couldn't be out of my way, because I'm not going any place in particular. Just looking for a job."

She picked up her old hat and crushed it down over her dark hair. "You'll have to talk to Grandmother and Grant Fisher about a job," she said, grabbed his hand and swung up behind him.

Grandma Lang turned out to be a white-

haired little old lady with enough arthritis in her feet and legs to make walking a chore for her. She looked Johnny Martin over out of sharp blue eyes and slowly nodded.

"I guess we can use him, eh, Grant?" she said.

Grant Fisher ran the Lazy L, doing it by himself with Jeanie's help. He stood in the doorway, filling it, for he was a big man with wide shoulders and a sagging paunch and thick long legs. Thirty-five, maybe. Eyes that were blue-gray and unfriendly.

"Follow me, Martin," he said shortly.

Johnny followed him out of the small unpainted ranch house to a low bunkhouse that stood in the shade of a wide-armed cottonwood.

"Plenty to do around here," Fisher said, scowling. "You'll earn your pay, or move on."

Johnny didn't say anything. As far as Grant Fisher was concerned, Johnny knew he was about as welcome on the Lazy L as blackleg. And he couldn't quite figure it out. Did the big black-headed hombre have his eye on the girl, and maybe figured he now had a rival? This idea seemed kind of ridiculous, however, for he couldn't imagine a kid like Jeanie Lang falling for a man old enough to be her father. Yet you never could tell.

They ate supper in the house with the old lady and the girl. Watching, listening, Johnny began to see how things stood. The girl didn't give Grant Fisher much house. The old lady—you couldn't tell what was going through her mind, but it was plain to be seen that she trusted Fisher's judgment concerning ranch affairs.

AFTER supper, Johnny went outside, rolled a smoke and watched the stars come out. Home and the man he'd shot and the name, Powell, seemed a long ways off. Feeling a lift to his spirits, he wandered to the corral and stood for a time rubbing the white-footed sorrel's silky ears. Since the death of his mother some six years ago, he'd had no one to love but the sorrel. His father, his uncle, his two cousins—

His father and uncle were dead from lawmen's bullets. That left just two Powells, Nick and Jess, to hate and fear. Face hard and set, he walked back to the bunkhouse and went to bed.

The next morning, Grant Fisher put Johnny to work. Like the man had said, there was plenty to do around the place, and it didn't take Johnny long to discover that his job was to do all the hard, dirty work.

Day after day, he cleaned out barns, patched fences and cut weeds. But no matter how hard he worked, he never got quite enough done to suit Fisher. Johnny wasn't much more than a kid, but he soon caught on to Grant Fisher's game. The man was looking for an excuse to fire him.

"Why?" Johnny asked himself, staring at the pitchfork blisters on his big hands. "What's he got against me?"

He didn't have any answer. But by the time the second Sunday rolled around, he had a pretty good picture of the set-up on the Lazy L.

The skunk in the woodpile was, of course, Milt Evans' big Diamond outfit. The Diamond had been crowding in on Lazy L range for some time, and no one was trying to stop them.

"We can't fight a big outfit like the Diamond," Fisher would argue whenever the old lady brought up the subject. "Better to let Evans have Eagle Valley than for us to go broke trying to keep him out."

And the old lady always agreed. Although she said a time or two in Johnny's hearing that if Tom Lang, her husband, were living, he wouldn't take this range-stealing lying down.

Then on that second Sunday afternoon, Johnny had a chance to talk to Jeanie without someone butting in. He was sitting in the shade of the cottonwood, mulling things over, when the girl came out of the house and walked over to him.

"Hi," she said, smiling. "Been so busy I've never got around to ask you how you

like it here."

She wore a thin summer dress—first time he'd seen her in a dress, and he had to swallow past a sudden lump in his throat, she was that pretty.

"I like it," he said. "Only—"

"Only what?"

"Jeanie, when I was a kid in school, I heard a story about a camel and an Arab. It seems on a cold night, this camel stuck his nose into the Arab's tent. Now, this Arab didn't much like it, but he didn't do anything about it. So the camel put his head inside."

"I know," she said, frowning. "I've heard the story, too. Pretty soon, the camel put his neck inside. Then his front feet. And before the Arab knew what was going on, the camel was inside and he had been crowded out into the cold."

Johnny picked up a stick and drew a diamond in the dust.

"There's your camel," he said, grinning up at her faintly. "He's taking over Eagle Valley. Maybe that's just getting his nose inside the tent."

"Grant seems to think Eagle Valley is all Milt Evans wants from us," Jeanie said. "You see, Johnny, Grant Fisher pulled us out of quite a hole after grandfather died. I'm not sure what we would have done if it hadn't been for Grant, and Grandmother's grateful to him. She's willing to trust his judgment, even if she doesn't always agree."

"And you?"

She looked at him out of troubled eyes. "I'm worried, Johnny. So worried I don't sleep at nights sometimes."

"What would it take to stop Milt Evans?" he asked.

SHE thought that over carefully before she answered. "My grandfather used to say that Milt Evans would take anything he could get as long as no one called his hand. I think that if my grandmother would show some fight, he'd back off. He has no legal right to Eagle Valley, and he knows it."

Johnny wiped out the diamond in the dust and tossed the stick away. "Grant's the one who doesn't want to fight. What's he afraid of?"

She thought that over, too, before she answered.

"I don't believe he's afraid. I believe he's doing what he thinks is best for the Lazy L. I'm not sure he's right, Johnny, but . . . You probably don't know he's asked me to marry him?"

That gave Johnny a jolt. He sat up a little straighter and tried to grin. "Well, if you need a best man—"

The still, level look she gave him cut him short.

"I'm not going to marry Grant," she said. "I'm grateful to him—but not in love with him."

She turned and walked away from Johnny, and suddenly it seemed to him that he'd never seen such a beautiful day in all his life.. He was still sitting there, feeling fine and dandy when Grant Fisher came out of the bunkhouse. Seeing Johnny, the man cut over toward the cottonwood.

"Took a look at that fence you been working on," he said, scowling. "A damn poor job, Martin, I'd say!"

Johnny felt a sudden flare of anger. Considering the poor material he'd been given to work with, the fence wasn't so bad. But he'd been taking a beating from his boss for a week and a half and guessed he could take it a little longer, just to be near Jeanie Lang.

"Sorry," he said. "I'll try to do better after this."

It wasn't the answer Fisher wanted. Disappointed, angry, the man went stamping on to the horse barn. A few minutes later, he rode to the west on one of the Lazy L cowponies.

No Lazy L cattle out that way, Johnny knew. And the little rail-end town of Spur Junction was to the east. Easing to his feet, he went out to the corral, saddled his own horse and picked up the man's trail.

Once across a rocky ridge, he ran into rough country. Fisher's trail was easy enough to follow, however, for he'd made no effort to conceal it. But Johnny fol-

lowed cautiously. You could never tell about a man who didn't want you around.

So when he came to a strip of pine timber, he slid to the ground and led his horse, picking his way carefully and silently. A half-mile of this, and he came to a low bluff overlooking a shallow creek, and saw Fisher below him in a small clearing. The man had dismounted and was sitting on an old stump, evidently waiting for someone.

Johnny pulled back among the trees to watch. Ten or fifteen minutes later, another man rode into the clearing, and Johnny felt a tingle move along his spine. He didn't need anyone to tell him who this long, lean old man was. He'd heard enough talk at the Lazy L to know that he was looking at Milt Evans, owner of the Diamond.

Evans stayed in the saddle. Fisher shoved to his feet and stood beside the Diamond horse, nodding his head to everything the old man had to say. At last, Evans pulled a wad of money from a pocket, counted out a dozen or so bills and handed them to Fisher. After that he wheeled his horse and rode rapidly away.

Johnny knew how it was then, with Grant Fisher taking pay from old Milt Evans. The whole dirty business was as plain as could be. Grant Fisher, figuring at first that maybe he could marry Jeanie Lang and get the Lazy L eventually along with her. But when that hadn't worked, he'd sold out to Evans.

A GREAT anger shaping up in him, Johnny Martin climbed down the face of the bluff and stepped into the clearing. Hearing him, Grant Fisher turned and reached toward the gun at his hip.

"I wouldn't do that!"

It wasn't the soft-spoken Johnny Martin speaking. It was Johnny Powell, the son of an outlaw. And he had the big walnut-butted six in his fist to back his words.

"So you're on Evans' pay-roll," he said, his voice filled with disgust. "So that's why you keep talking the old lady out of fighting against the Diamond."

"Prove it," Fisher said.

"I saw the old man give you money."

"Years ago, I worked for him. Can you prove he wasn't paying me back wages?"

"No," Johnny said contemptuously. "But I can lick the bloody hell out of you!"

"Big talk from a man with a gun in his hand," Grant said.

"We'll see."

Johnny took Grant Fisher's gun and tossed it and his own gun into a bush at the edge of the clearing.

Fisher laughed then, an ugly snarling laugh. "You damn fool kid!" he said. "You just threw your life away!"

"We'll see," Johnny said again, and sidestepped the man't first blow.

They'd trained him well, his outlaw father, his uncle, the two cousins. Sure, they were going to make an outlaw and killer out of him. They'd taught him all the tricks. To draw and shoot faster than a man can think. To fight dirty. To break a man's arm, to unjoint his shoulder with a twist of the wrist, to paralyze him with a hatchet blow against his neck.

But he fought this fight clean, for when his first black anger had passed, he was again Johnny Martin, the son of a good and gentle mother. He took some vicious blows, but the ones he dished out were much worse.

Soon he began to taste blood from his battered mouth, and felt his right eye swelling shut. But he kept it clean and cut Grant Fisher down with the sure, relentless skill of a trained boxer. And when the man lay in the dust, pulling in his breath in great gasping sobs, Johnny stumbled over to the bush, found his gun and rode back to the Lazy L.

"That's how it was," he said, finishing his story to old lady Lang and the girl.

He stood tiredly in the doorway, his hat in his skinned hands, one eye swollen shut, his mouth puffed as if he'd been eating green persimmons. He wasn't sure they'd believe him, but he could see that they did. They had matched his words against what had been happening in Eagle Valley and knew he'd spoken the truth.

"I don't know what'll happen next,"

Johnny said, "but I don't think Grant will come back here to work."

"He'd better not!" the old lady said. Her eyes were bright with anger. "No fool like an old fool," she said in self-condemnation. "All the time, I knew there was just one thing to do—get tough with Milt Evans. But I kept listening to Grant."

Groaning at the rheumatic pains in her stiff old joints, she shoved to her feet.

"We'll drive the Diamond cattle out of Eagle Valley tomorrow!"

Johnny grinned in spite of his battered mouth. "Shove the camel's head out of the tent," he said, winking his good eye at Jeanie.

That evening, he and Jeanie sat on the front porch of the small house, not saying much at first.

"Johnny," she said at last, "you've never told me much about yourself."

WHAT could he tell her? That his father's side of the family were outlaws? That a deputy back home had accused him of a crime he hadn't committed and had tried to shoot him down like a trapped animal? Nope, he couldn't tell her that. So he told her about his mother. Not how she'd been fooled into marrying a man who had treated her like the dirt under his feet, but of her gentleness and kindness. For what else was there to tell a girl like Jeanie Lang?

The next morning, the three of them went to Eagle Valley. Grandma Lang in a rattly old buggy; Johnny and the girl on saddle ponies.

Once in the valley, the old lady stationed the buggy on a ridge from where she could see what was going on. Johnny and Jeanie began to cut out the Diamond steers and head them southwest.

The day grew still and hot, the dust rose like a gray curtain. It was likely the dust cloud that brought the Diamond crew around to see what was going on. Johnny and Jeanie were about half finished with their chore when the riders came clattering into the valley.

Milt Evans, tall, gaunt, an angry red

[*Turn page*]

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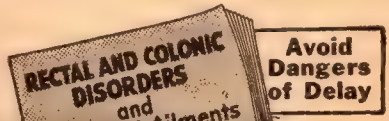

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firing his sunken cheeks, spurring his plunging horse toward the two youngsters. Grant Fisher, his face black from his beating, sided the old man. And Johnny didn't miss the look of deadly hate in Fisher's eyes. Two Diamond cowboys brought up the rear, lean, tough, ready to fight at the drop of a hat.

"What the hell you two think you're doing?" Evans asked angrily.

It was the old lady who answered him. She came fogging down from the ridge in the swaying buggy and pulled up short in front of the rancher and his men.

"We're holding on to what is ours!" she answered flatly. For a moment, her eyes smoldered scornfully on Grant Fisher. "I listened to that doublecrosser too long," she said to Evans. "Now, I'm through listening to anyone except a good lawyer!" She leveled the buggy whip at the old man. "Tell your men to finish cutting out your cattle and get 'em out of here!"

Watching, ready for trouble, Johnny realized that Jeanie had been right about the Diamond owner. Call his hand, and he'd back off.

The Diamond crew made short work of rounding up the remaining stragglers and heading them out of the valley. Milt Evans was the last to leave.

"Didn't realize so many of my cows strayed onto your range," he said half-apologetically.

"You're a liar, Milt Evans, and you know it," Grandma Lang clipped.

Face flushing, Evans jerked his horse around and followed his outfit.

The old lady glanced up at Johnny then and smiled thinly.

"Guess we don't need to worry about the Diamond for a spell," she said, "but Grant Fisher's a horse of a different color. He hates you enough to shoot you in the back."

Grinning, Johnny rode up beside Jeanie as they headed homeward. But on the inside, he wasn't grinning, for he knew that Mrs. Lang had spoken the truth about Grant Fisher. And when they came in sight of the old ranch house—

Two men and their tired mounts stood in the shade of the big cottonwood. The moment Johnny saw them, he knew who they were, and a cold, hard knot began to form deep down inside him.

"Visitors," the old lady muttered. "Strangers."

Johnny Martin Powell swallowed past the terrible dryness in his throat and said, "They're my cousins from Kansas. Nick and Jess Powell."

NICK was twenty-five; Jess, a couple years younger. They had that sandy hair that all the Powells had, and blue eyes to go with it. Smooth-shaven, soft-voiced, dressed in new boots, levis and fancy shirts, they didn't look like outlaws. They looked like two young cowboys who'd been working steady and spending their wages on good horses, saddles and clothes.

"Hello, Johnny boy," one of them said, and the other said, "Nice to see you again."

But they weren't looking at Johnny. They were looking at the girl in a way that sent the blood pounding through his head. Holding his voice steady with an effort, he made the introductions.

"Cousin Johnny just up and left without telling anyone good-by," Nick said, smiling pleasantly at Jeanie. "Really had us worried about him, so when we had a little time off, we trailed him. Wasn't hard to do—a big red-headed kid riding a white-footed sorrel."

"We're mighty happy to find Johnny looking so well," Jess said soberly.

There wasn't a thing in the world to make the old lady or Jeanie suspicious of these two pleasant, nice-looking cousins of Johnny Martin's. Mrs. Lang said they were welcome, that there was plenty of room for them in the bunkhouse.

"Thank you, ma'am," Nick said. "We'll be happy to stay a day or two."

Fighting his growing panic, Johnny took them into the bunkhouse.

"Nice place here, Johnny boy," Nick said. "Lonely and out of the way."

"Yeah," Jess muttered. "Things got too hot back home for us, so—"

"Why follow me?" Johnny blurted angrily. "Why can't you two leave me alone?"

Nick smiled and hooked big thumbs beneath his gun belt. "We need you, Johnny," he said. "We need a third man."

"We've been over that before," Johnny said wearily. "I'll never team up with you, and you know it."

"Johnny," Nick said, "from now on, you'll do anything we say. After shooting a deputy sheriff, you've got no other choice—unless you've got a taste for a rope necktie. And we've got your first job all planned. You're going to help us hold up the Spur Junction bank as soon as our horses have rested a couple days."

"Easy, Cousin," Jess said, putting his gun against Johnny's back. "We'll just take charge of your ammunition till you feel more friendly toward us."

"Kind of gone on that Lang girl, aren't you, Johnny?" Nick said, an ugly twist coming to his mouth. "Give us no trouble, and we won't touch her."

They took all of Johnny's shells and gave his empty gun back to him.

"That bank's a cinch, Johnny," Nick said. "Only one man in it at noon. And the town marshal's a has-been."

Sick at heart, Johnny sank down on his bunk and put his hands over his face. He was trapped and he knew it.

The next day, Nick and Jess worked with him out on the north range. At noon, Jeanie rode out with their dinners in a big basket. She laughed merrily at the cousins' joke and maybe wondered why Johnny was so quiet. But she didn't seem to think anything was wrong.

Still chuckling at something Jess had said, she picked up the empty basket and swung back into the saddle.

"I've got to hurry home," she said. "Did a washing this morning, and if I don't get things hung out, they won't dry today."

She rode away in a little swirl of dust, with Nick's and Jess' eyes following her until she vanished over a ridge. Watching them, Johnny felt his inward sickness and fear grow. They had promised to leave

[*Turn page*]

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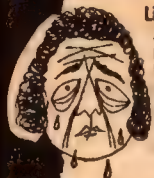

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her alone if he gave them no trouble, but he didn't have much faith in their promises.

THE NEXT day, the girl rode with them to Eagle Valley. All along the way, Johnny felt her eying him curiously. When they rode into the valley, she pulled up beside him and pointed to a scattering of cattle in a narrow hollow.

"Let's go see if there's any Diamond stock in that bunch," she said.

They rode into the hollow with Nick and Jess tagging along. They didn't find any Diamond cattle.

"The camel's still out of the tent," Jeanie said.

At that moment, a rattler let go with an angry buzz.

Johnny's hand moved faster than his thinking. He pulled his empty gun and drew a bead on the snake's head. Then his mind caught up with his hand, and he turned a frightened glance in the girl's direction.

She was watching him, waiting for him to shoot. He managed a grin and shoved the gun back into the holster.

"Wouldn't want to miss and ruin my reputation," he said.

Nick's gun roared, and the headless snake went twisting away. Johnny rode back up the slope with Jess and Nick beside him. He was scared. He was scared worse than he'd ever been scared before in his life. Not for himself, but for the girl. He had a hunch he'd given the show away, that maybe she'd try to help him and get herself hurt.

They rode back to the ranch without talking much. Later, after Jeanie had gone into the house, Nick said, "Johnny, try to remember you're packing an empty gun."

"Yeah," Johnny said. "I'll try to remember."

After supper, he sat on his bunk, listening to Nick and Jess go over the plans for the bank robbery.

"You got things straight in your head, Johnny?" Nick asked, his eyes like bits of blue ice.

Johnny nodded. "I know what I'm to do—sack up the money."

"Let's go over it once again, anyway," Jess said, grinning crookedly. "You tell us, Johnny."

But he never told them, for at that moment, Jeanie came hurrying from the house toward the open doorway.

"Just finished ironing your clothes, Johnny," she said, laying a neatly folded pair of levis and shirt on a near-by chair.

"Thanks," Johnny said, "but you didn't need to—"

"No trouble at all," she said smilingly. Then to Nick and Jess. "If you boys have anything that needs washing—"

"Thank you, miss," Nick said. "Perhaps in a day or two."

He stood in the doorway until she'd gone back into the house.

Johnny went to bed, but he couldn't sleep. He knew now what a fool he'd been to think he could ever escape being a Powell. In any direction he might turn, there would be either a bullet waiting for him, or a hangman's noose.

When morning came, he was still pursuing this bitter, hopeless line of thought. He lay there, staring unseeingly at a streak of morning sun until Nick growled, "All right, Cousin, come alive!"

He crawled from the bunk and put on the clean shirt. The last shirt Jeanie Lang would ever wash and iron for him. He picked up the levis—

Funny, but he knew before he stuck his long legs into those clean levis what was in a sagging pocket. And suddenly his heart was banging away so hard that he was afraid Nick and Jess would catch on.

He slid his feet into his worn boots and buckled on his empty gun. Not until then did he dare put a hand into the pocket and feel the cold steel of Jeanie's small pistol.

The girl had guessed why he hadn't shot the rattler. She wasn't sure of the spot he was in, or just what Nick and Jess were up to. She wasn't sure of anything, except the fact that he could do more with a loaded gun than she could. And, trusting him, she'd put the only available

weapon into his hands.

But he knew he didn't dare start trouble now. Not with a little popgun like that against two men with .45s. He had to wait until he could take on Nick and Jess one at a time.

BREAKFAST over, they headed out for the north range, but once out of sight of the house, they circled toward town. Nick and Jess were tight-lipped and tense now. Boxing Johnny between them, they rode unhurriedly, saving their horses for the get-away.

The sun stood high in the sky when they rode into the dusty deserted street of Spur Junction. Jess stayed with the horses, his eyes whipping along the false-fronted buildings for any sign of danger. Johnny walked ahead of Nick into the bank.

"Easy, Pop," Nick said, slanting his gun toward the old man behind the counter.

Johnny kicked open a little gate and stepped behind the counter. Walking past the old banker, he shifted the empty saddle-bag to his left hand. Through a window, he could see Jess and the horses. The street was still deserted.

Moving toward the vault, Johnny wondered just how straight and how hard the little popgun in his pocket would shoot. Turning away from Nick, he got the pistol into his big hand. It felt like a kid's toy. With a gun like this, he knew he was a fool to give Nick any warning, but he couldn't just face around and start shooting.

"Drop it, Nick!" he said.

Nick's eyes flickered toward him. He saw the snub-nosed toy in Johnny's fist. It took him a split-second to get over his surprise and angle his gun around. In that split-second, Johnny snapped a bullet into the big man's left shoulder.

Nick grunted. He didn't drop his gun. He didn't seem to know he'd been hit. Snarling, he sent a shot smashing across the counter.

Johnny felt the bullet scream past his face. He shifted the tiny gun a trifle and triggered twice. [*Turn page*]

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This time, Nick dropped his gun and clutched at the counter. But his fingers suddenly lost their strength, and he slid from sight. Johnny heard Jess pound through the doorway and turned to face a blasting .45. But in the shadowy interior of the bank, Jess wasn't sure of his target.

Johnny's first shot tore a hole in the glass door and inch from Jess' left ear. His second drilled into the man's chest to the left of a shirt button. Jess sank to his knees, then fell forward on his face.

"It's all over," Johnny said to the old man. "You can put down your hands now."

They turned Johnny Martin loose after they'd listened to his and the banker's stories of what had happened.

"Better hurry back to the Lazy L, son," the old marshal said, "and give Jeanie Lang back her popgun. Likely she's pretty worried about you by now. In the meantime, I'll get off a telegram to that town in Kansas. Wouldn't surprise me if you don't have some reward money coming."

Johnny bought a box of shells for his walnut-butted sixgun. Then he climbed into saddle and rode out of town.

Nick Powell was dead. Jess was still alive, but the medico had said he didn't have a chance to last through the night. So there was nothing to fear from the Powells. But before morning, Johnny knew, the marshal would have an answer to his elegram. He would know then that Johnny Martin was Johnny Powell, wanted for killing a lawman.

All this mean just one thing. Johnny had to start running again. He had to forget there was a girl named Jeanie Lang, and whatever dreams he'd had of living within the law.

Blinded by all these bitter thoughts, he turned off the Lazy L trail and headed straight toward the safety of the mountains. He had no notion of immediate danger until a gun roared and a bullet rocked him out of the saddle.

He wasn't hurt, he told himself. He didn't feel any pain. Just a numbness all along his left side. Turning his head, he saw the white feet of his horse splashing up puffs of dust. Then he heard a second shot and saw a chip fly from a rock in front of his face.

SOMEHOW that second blast gave him the will to die fighting. He rolled, pulled his gun and lifted his head. Grant Fisher circled into view, riding a long-legged roan. "When I pay a debt," the man rasped, "I like to pay it with interest!"

His gun came up spouting flame, and Johnny felt the hammering shock of another bullet. His own gun was suddenly too heavy for him to lift, but somehow he lined it on the blurring target and squeezed off a shot. Before blackness closed in, he saw Fisher roll from the saddle and pile up under the churning feet of the terrified roan.

The first person Johnny Martin saw when he opened his eyes was the doctor. Then he saw the town marshal, and realized that he was in bed in a white-walled room. "Care if I talk to him, Doc?" the marshal asked.

"Go ahead," the medico said. "He'll be all right now."

And suddenly Jeanie was standing there, too, smiling down at him and holding to his hand. No wonder he didn't catch everything the marshal was saying, but he did hear enough to learn that someone had found him and Grant Fisher's body on the mountain trail two days ago.

Then he looked at Jeanie again and forgot to listen until the marshal said, "Before Jess died, he took a sudden notion to talk. Said that the lawman you shot didn't die, that right now he's under arrest. Seems he was in cahoots with your two cousins on a stage robbery and killed a man. That's why he went after you, son. Figured on claiming he'd had to shoot you for resisting arrest. Was going to leave the loot in your saddle-bag to make it look like you robbed the stage and killed the driver. Only trouble with his scheme, you beat him to the draw, and the loot was found in his saddle-bag. That was when your cousins took a sudden notion to leave home till things cooled off. When

they ran across your trail—well, I reckon you know the rest." The old lawman grinned faintly. "Maybe it's a good thing that Grant Fisher waylaid you, son or you'd still be running."

If Johnny hadn't been so weak and tired, he'd likely have said an amen to that. But as it was, he closed his eyes and went back to sleep. Later, when he opened his eyes, the marshal and the doctor were gone, but Jeanie was still there, her small hand in his.

"Hi, Johnny," she said, smiling shyly.

"Hi," he said, grinning up at her.

"Hurry and get well," she said, "so you can come back to the Lazy L."

"You mean you want me to?"

"Hush," she said, "you're not supposed to talk."

Then she answered his question by a touch of her lips to his.

THE SILVER WATCH

(Concluded from page 60)

yond it was Joe's sprawled form.

He stared at the unmoving figure, seeing dimly that Joe's legs were spraddled on the bank, his head down in the water. Mechanically, Rick turned to his wounded horse, aimed, fired.

With legs like lead, he stepped over the dead horse and looked down at Joe's body. His vision blurred so that for a moment he couldn't see Joe at all. Then his sight cleared, and he saw a bright object in the water just beside one of Joe's hands.

He bent down and picked up Joe's silver watch, turned it over and over, then pressed the top so that the back snapped open. It was too dark to see what was inside, but Rick knew anyway. Cursing, he whirled and threw the watch away.

Then he stood trembling with a sudden chill, and it was a long time before he could form his lips to make a warbling sound. The whistle echoed and turned hollow in the night. It seemed to have a deathy, unreal quality. But Rick could tell by the answering hoofbeats that the buckskin was returning, and he thought, his mouth grim, how much Joe really had taught him.

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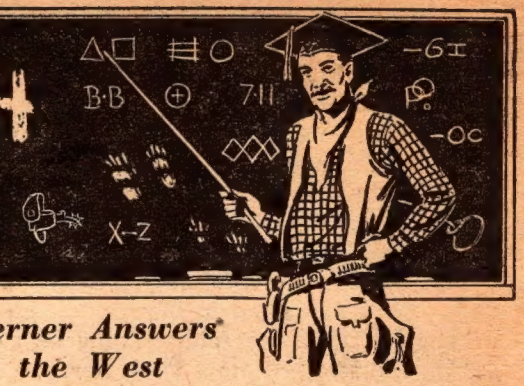

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Is it true that rattlesnakes and armadillos often live in the same den?—W.H.B. (Mo.)

A.—I wouldn't say "often," but sometimes they do. The armadillo's hard shell makes it almost totally invulnerable to rattlesnake bite, and since the armadillo itself is a peaceable citizen that lives on worms, insects, tender roots, etc., the two manage to get along. The armadillo is hunted for its shell, from which fancy baskets are made. Sometimes armadillo hunters pull the critter out of its burrow by the tail—which is all right if the tail doesn't happen to be the very similar looking tail of a rattlesnake. That mistake has cost several men their lives.

Q.—Were there Indians who, around 1800, lived in semi-permanent villages for several years at a time in the mountains of Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona, and who were hunters and trappers rather than farmers? If so, where could I get hold of a book about them? —P.M.E. (Ariz.)

A.—I know of no such tribe, except in so far as Utes, Apaches, Kiowas, Comanches or other migrant tribes may have happened to camp a long time in one place. I doubt if you have in mind the Pueblos, who are and always have been village-dwelling farmers, though hunters as well. For more complete information on Indians of the period and area you mention, I suggest that you write to The School of American Research, Santa Fe, N. M., or to Dr. Frank Hibben, Professor of Anthropology, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, N. M.

Here's further reader comment on that "Red River Valley" song, often called "The Cowboy's Love Song." Mrs. Grace Shaw Tolman of Springfield, Maine, writes that she growed up in the Red River of the North country, and that Reader E. H. Dunbar of Edmonton, Canada is right in saying that in the original version it was "the halfbreed that loved you so true," and not "the cowboy who loved you so true," as sung in modern versions. So I guess that settles that.

Q.—I have always thought the famous Horrell-Higgins feud was centered in Lampasas County, Texas, but a friend tries to tell me it was in Lincoln County, New Mexico. Can you settle the argument?—D.D.L. (Tex.)

A.—You are right. However, it is true that at one time during the feud most of the Horrell clan packed up and skeedaddled to Lincoln County, N. M., where they soon had another feud all smoked up with native Mexican-American *rancheros*. Later they returned to Texas, where several of them were lynched by a mob while prisoners in the Bosque County jail, northeast from Lampasas.

Q.—Which was the first cattle trail town in Kansas, Abilene or Dodge City?—Burt (Neb.)

A.—Neither. Abilene antedated Dodge as a trail town, the first Texas herd arriving there in 1867. In point of numbers of longhorns delivered to the railroad, Abilene was one of the biggest of all the old trail towns, but the very first was Baxter Springs, Kansas, though its days of longhorn hell and glory were rather short.

—*S. Omar Barker*

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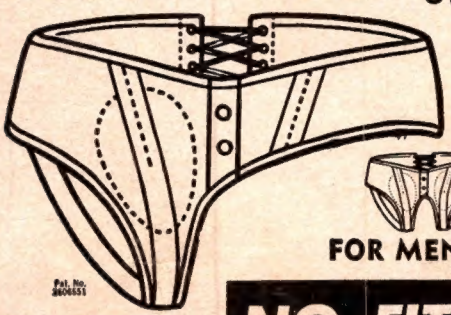

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We took her in for the night and I notified the police. But I knew they wouldn't find any corpse . . .

Some of us wondered if she was telling the truth. Until a heavy rock came crashing through the bedroom window, narrowly missing her head! Next we found that our car had been deliberately damaged.

And so Caroline is marooned out here for the night . . .

It's interesting to watch a pretty woman who is frightened and does not know which way to run. She seems grateful for our shelter; she even seems to trust us. With the living room brightly lighted, Caroline behaves as if she is perfectly safe here with us.

But she isn't. I know—because **I am the murderer who must kill her before morning!**

* * *

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